

ISA S Brief

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Taleban Leader Baitullah Mehsud Dead: Is it the Beginning of the End of Terrorism?

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Abstract

The reported death of the Pakistan Taleban leader, Baitullah Mehsud, is a major development in the ongoing struggle against terrorism. It undoubtedly carries crucial implications not only for peace and normalcy in Pakistan, but also in South Asia and indeed the wider world. This brief contextualises the events leading up to his death on 5 August 2009. It is suggested that Pakistan should not relent now. It is in Pakistan's best interest to dismantle the terrorist networks that still exist in its territory, notwithstanding the formal ban on them.

Introduction

Taleban leader, Baitullah Mehsud, who was behind scores of terrorist attacks in Pakistan reportedly died on 5 August 2009 after a United States' drone fired missiles at the house of his father-in-law in South Waziristan, where Mehsud was visiting. Pakistan Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, could be seen on television manifestly pleased with the outcome of the attack.

It may be recalled that, in recent months, Mehsud was being portrayed as Pakistan's "Enemy Number One". Conspiracy theories denounced him as a paid agent of the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and India's Research and Analysis Wing. However, his death, as a result of missiles fired by an American drone, suggests closer relations between the CIA and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence and the military because without the sharing of intelligence between them, such an operation would not have been possible.

Although the most "high profile death" attributed to Mehsud (which he had denied) was that of the late Benazir Bhutto on 27 December 2007, he was instrumental in many other outrages. In 2008 alone, 2,148 terrorist attacks took place in Pakistan, with 2,267 fatalities and 4,558 injured. This was a phenomenal increase of 746 percent over 2005. If the total deaths from various types of violent activities in Pakistan were included, the number would go up to 7,997 killed and 9,670 injured since 2001.

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Rise of Baitullah Mehsud and the Terror Trail

The story of Mehsud's evolution as a fanatical Islamist is not very different from that of thousands of other young men from the tribal areas who were inducted into *jihadist* activities at a tender age. He was probably recruited after the Soviet Red Army withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, because Mehsud (born in 1974) was only 15 at that time.

Mehsud attended a *madrassa* (religious school) in the tribal areas for a few months and was converted to a world view that made any individual or group a legitimate target for liquidation if they did not adhere to a severe and militant version of Islam that he and his followers subscribed to.

Mehsud emerged as a tribal leader in 2004. He swore allegiance to Mulla Omar, who had headed the Taleban regime in Afghanistan from 1996 to the end of 2001, when the United States-led military action forced the Taleban to flee from the capital, Kabul. They sought refuge in the tribal areas on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. While Omar continued to lead the Taleban in Afghanistan, by early 2005, Mehsud consolidated his position as the leader of the Taleban in Pakistan.

In the areas under their control in Pakistan, the Taleban carried out punishments such as chopping the hands of alleged thieves and stoning adulterers to death. Moreover, the *Tehreek-e-Taleban Pakistan* declared war on General Pervez Musharraf's government for joining the United States-led war on terrorism. There is some evidence to suggest that the Afghan and Pakistani Taleban did not always see eye to eye, and Omar's overall leadership of the entire Taleban was more symbolic than real.

In any event, Pakistan conducted a number of operations against the Taleban and Al-Qaeda in the tribal areas. Several Al-Qaeda operatives were captured and handed over to the United States. In addition, transit routes for the United States and the allied forces, provision of bases in Pakistan and the sharing of intelligence with the Americans, which enabled them to target Al-Qaeda enclaves, earned Musharraf the wrath of the Taleban.

In 2005 and 2006, the Taleban and their sectarian allies in other parts of Pakistan targeted Shias, Christians, Ahmadiyyas and foreigners, inflicting death and injury on hundreds of them. That brought terrorism deep into Pakistani towns and cities outside the tribal belt.

From 2007 onwards, suicide bombings against government functionaries, including ministers, army personnel and police and security forces, escalated and claimed hundreds of lives. On a number of occasions, hotels and restaurants were hit by suicide bombers with a view to kill specifically foreigners who frequented such places.

The February 2008 elections in Pakistan, followed by the formation of an elected civilian government in late March and the exit of Musharraf as President of Pakistan in August, did not convince Mehsud to call off terrorist attacks on Pakistan.

Failure of the Peace Deal

In the Swat Valley, the Taleban clashed with Pakistani troops. They blew up some 200 girls' schools and ordered stoning, whipping, flogging and other barbaric punishments against

alleged offenders. A peace deal was finally agreed between the Pakistan government and Mehsud, permitting the Taleban to impose the *Shariah* in areas under their control.

The peace deal foundered soon afterwards because the Taleban made it clear that their movement aimed at the whole of Pakistan. In any case, the United States looked upon the peace overtures between the two sides with considerable consternation, as it was footing the bill for the military operations and did not want the Taleban to consolidate their power.

The attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore in March 2009 considerably embarrassed Pakistan. On several occasions previously, targets in Lahore had been hit by Mehsud's men but the assault on the Sri Lankan team, which left several policemen dead, greatly angered the Punjabis. The Pakistan press also began to mention that many members of the Taleban were criminals and thugs, and not pious Islamic warriors.

For skeptics in the Pakistan establishment who until then were in two minds as to whether the Pakistani Taleban were freedom fighters or terrorists committed to a self-destructive, nihilistic world view, the attack in Lahore proved to be the wake-up call.

To such changes in perception from the inside, the pressure exerted by the United States, which has been handing largesse worth billions of dollars to Pakistan in return for its military hunt for Al-Qaeda and the Taleban along Pakistan's borders, provided further encouragement for Pakistan's government to take action against the terrorists. At the same time, in the aftermath of the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, India had vociferously demanded the dismantlement of the terrorist networks.

Military Action in the Swat Valley

Things finally came to a head when, in May 2009, the Taleban in the Swat Valley drove out Pakistani government officials and proclaimed the establishment of Islamic rule. The reign of terror let loose triggered an exodus of more than two million people from their homes, resulting in a gigantic humanitarian crisis.

The Pakistani military chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, ordered strong and stern action which ultimately proved to be a roaring success. Within a few weeks, Pakistan's writ was again established in the major towns. Shortly after, most of the Swat Valley had been cleared of the Taleban.

Such accomplishments emboldened the military to go after the Taleban in their stronghold in South Waziristan. However, there have been some unconfirmed reports of the military seeking a deal with the Taleban and thus "scattering them around".

Conclusion

Even if Mehsud is now dead, some 15,000 to 20,000 hardcore Taleban members are still functioning in Pakistan and they are not likely to disband themselves. Other terrorist organisations such as the *Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* and *Jaish-e-Muhammad* also remain intact, though they have been outlawed and banned since early 2002.

Pakistan's security and military forces should capitalise on Mehsud's death. With the Taleban likely to be in disarray, the time is right to strike a decisive blow on it. However, the

Pakistani government needs to act fast, as past experiences have shown that indecisiveness boomerangs, sometimes all too soon.

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