

The Significance of Qari Zain's Assassination in Pakistan

By Rahimullah Yusufzai

ON JUNE 23, 2009, prominent tribal militant commander Qari Zainuddin Mehsud was assassinated, reportedly on the orders of Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP) leader Baitullah Mehsud.¹ His death came only a week after formally announcing a rebellion against Baitullah and his militia in primetime interviews on a number of independent television stations in Pakistan. The assassination of the 29-year-old commander, commonly known as Qari Zain, occurred in the southern city of Dera Ismail Khan in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), not far from the Mehsud tribe's native South Waziristan tribal agency bordering Afghanistan.

Qari Zain's death demonstrates that Baitullah Mehsud will attempt to eliminate any tribal leader that challenges his authority. It also deals a significant setback to the Pakistani government, which was reportedly providing Qari Zain with funds and weapons to combat Baitullah Mehsud and his TTP forces. This article will discuss the significance of Qari Zain's assassination, explain why the Qari Zain and Baitullah Mehsud factions have been at war with one another, identify Qari Zain's successor, and briefly outline Pakistan's three-pronged strategy for moving forward.

The Assassination

On June 23, Qari Zain was shot to death by Gulbuddin Mehsud, one of his trusted guards. The guard also injured Qari Zain's aide, Baz Mohammad, before escaping. The assassin was once loyal to Baitullah Mehsud, but opted to join the pro-government splinter group named after Qari Zain's slain cousin, Abdullah Mehsud. According to Baz Mohammad, the assailant rejoined Qari Zain's forces after accepting the group's general amnesty that was offered to fighters willing to abandon Baitullah's militia.² As expected, the TTP claimed

responsibility for the assassination. Waliur Rahman, a deputy to Baitullah, and leading TTP commander Hakimullah Mehsud phoned reporters to claim that they had plotted Qari Zain's murder on Baitullah's orders after he turned against their group. Waliur Rahman described Qari Zain as a miscreant and warned that "anyone who works against us will face the same fate."³

By ordering Qari Zain's killing, Baitullah has demonstrated that he will not tolerate any opponent, particularly one from his own tribe and with links to Pakistan's security forces. The killing was similar to the 2008 assassination of Haji Namdar, the leader of the non-Taliban Islamic militant group Amr bil Maroof wa Nahi Anil Munkar (Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) operating in Bara area of Khyber Agency. He too was killed by one of his guards, who later confessed that he was tasked by Baitullah's close aide Hakimullah Mehsud to kill Namdar.⁴ In Namdar's case, Baitullah decided to kill him after he stopped supporting the Taliban and began working with Pakistani authorities by expelling TTP militants from his area of control. Rivals have also accused Baitullah of sponsoring the murder of around 283 tribal elders in his native South Waziristan.⁵ Qari Zain's assassination reinforced Baitullah's reputation as the most powerful and dangerous Pakistani Taliban commander.

Most importantly, the assassination was a setback for Pakistan's government and military, which were reportedly supporting him and his ally, Turkistan Bhittani, against Baitullah's faction. Although Pakistan Army spokesman Major General Athar Abbas maintained that the military had not helped any of the anti-Baitullah Taliban forces, he conceded that the government might be engaging with them at a political level.⁶ Evidence that the government and the army was helping Qari Zain's

group became obvious when a military helicopter flew his body to Abbottabad, where his displaced family, including his wife, had moved to escape Baitullah's reach.⁷ The body was kept overnight at the Combined Military Hospital in Abbottabad before being flown to Dera Ismail Khan for burial held under the supervision of security forces.⁸ A spokesman for the Qari Zain group also admitted that they had received modest government funding in the shape of a religious donation, or *zakat*.⁹

History of Qari Zain's Split from Baitullah

Qari Zain split from Baitullah Mehsud's group after the death of his cousin Abdullah Mehsud in 2007. Abdullah was a Pakistani Taliban commander and one of the most wanted militants during the rule of General Pervez Musharraf. Before becoming a leading Pakistani Taliban commander, Abdullah was captured by U.S. forces in Afghanistan in December 2001 and later transferred to the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay along with other al-Qa`ida and Taliban commanders. After spending 25 months at Guantanamo Bay, he was released in March 2004 due to insufficient evidence that he belonged to al-Qa`ida or that he was a top Taliban commander.¹⁰ Upon his return home, he became an instant hero, gave speeches preaching jihad and assembled a band of fighters. He was under the command of Baitullah Mehsud, however, who at the time was almost unknown and preferred to work in the background unlike the younger Abdullah.¹¹ It was Abdullah's death on July 24, 2007—when he blew himself up following a shootout with Pakistan's security forces in Zhob in Baluchistan—that sparked the fierce rivalry between his family and Baitullah Mehsud.¹²

7 "Baitullah Mehsud's Rival Commander Qari Zainuddin Killed," *Daily Aaj* [Peshawar], June 24, 2009.

8 Syed Shoaib Hasan, "A Very Strange Taliban Burial," BBC, June 25, 2009.

9 Sabrina Tavernise and Pir Zubair Shah, "Pakistan to Strike at Leader of Taliban," *New York Times*, June 15, 2009.

10 "Profile: Abdullah Mehsud," BBC, July 24, 2007. Also see, Rahimullah Yusufzai, "A Daredevil Militant with an Artificial Leg," *The News International*, October 12, 2004.

11 Personal interviews, Abdullah Mehsud and Baitullah Mehsud, South Waziristan Agency, October 9, 2004.

12 Salim Shahid, "Cornered Militant Blows Himself Up," *Dawn*, July 25, 2007.

1 M. Irfan Mughal, "Baitullah Rival Shot Dead," *Dawn*, June 24, 2009.

2 Qayum Nawaz Babar, "Baitullah Turns Tables on Govt," *The News International*, June 24, 2009.

3 "TTP Claims Qari Zainuddin's Killing," Agence France-Press, June 25, 2009.

4 "Tense Calm in Bara After Namdar Killing," *The News International*, August 15, 2008.

5 "Baitullah Mehsud Getting Tough Competition from Tribal Rival," Asian News International (ANI), May 11, 2009.

6 Kathy Gannon, "Assassination in Pakistan Exposes Taliban Rifts," Associated Press, June 23, 2009.

Qari Zain and his family accused Baitullah of involvement in Abdullah's murder.¹³ Qari Zain also suspected Baitullah's hand in the murder of his father, Masoodur Rahman Mehsud, and one of Abdullah's successors, Saifullah Mehsud.¹⁴ To avenge these losses, Qari Zain tried for almost two years to rally the Mehsud tribe and Taliban fighters against Baitullah without much success. He began gaining strength in the spring of 2009 when Pakistan's government and its intelligence agencies supported him and another dissident Pakistani Taliban commander, Turkistan Bhattani, to weaken Baitullah's faction. With Qari Zain's death, this strategy has backfired, at least for the time being.

Mantle Passed to Misbahuddin Mehsud

Qari Zain's brother, Misbahuddin Mehsud, who is known by the alias Toofan Mehsud, replaced him as the commander of the Abdullah Mehsud group.¹⁵ He is expected to continue the vendetta against Baitullah in what has become a blood feud. Pledging to avenge his brother's murder, Misbahuddin said he would not rest until Baitullah was dead. Like his slain brother, he supports the ongoing military operation in South Waziristan and said that those killed or apprehended in the fighting are Baitullah's men and that all of them are terrorists. As was the case with Qari Zain, Misbahuddin said he would continue to assist the "jihad" in Afghanistan against U.S.-led coalition forces and announced support for Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar.¹⁶ It appears that at this point supporting Misbahuddin is the government's primary option to weaken and defeat Baitullah.

The government hopes that Misbahuddin will mobilize his slain brother's followers. In an interview, Maulana Mohammad Luqman, a cleric from South Waziristan, estimated that Qari Zain's group had about 700 fighters.¹⁷ Other sources said the group could call 500 to 1,000 armed men. Qari Zain and his commanders used to

claim that they had 3,000 fighters and that their strength was growing. In fact, the group had hunted down Baitullah's men in Tank and Dera Ismail Khan districts, capturing a number of them allegedly with the help of Pakistan's intelligence agencies. Yet the Qari Zain group does not have any presence in South Waziristan, from where it was forced out by the stronger Baitullah Mehsud group. Qari Zain himself had to first shift from his village in Barwand in South Waziristan to the Shakai area of the agency to take refuge with an anti-Baitullah faction. Later, he took up residence in Jandola under the protection of his ally, Turkistan Bhattani. Finally, he moved to Dera Ismail Khan city in the NWFP to set up his organization with assistance from the government.

Presently, Baitullah appears well-entrenched on account of his army of committed fighters not only in South Waziristan, but also in other tribal areas in FATA and districts in the NWFP. As the founder and head of the TTP, he commands several thousand fighters in the province and also like-minded allies in the rest of Pakistan, particularly in Punjab. His fighting strength could be in the range of 10,000 or more.¹⁸ Although some of his men had previously defected to Qari Zain's group, this rate may slow in light of Qari Zain's death.¹⁹ Moreover, Qari Zain's assassination has created fear among Mehsud tribesmen, and they may be less willing to rise against Baitullah even though they see him as responsible for the increase in U.S. Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) strikes and Pakistani military operations in their villages.²⁰

Pakistan's Three-Stage Strategy to Weaken Baitullah

Pakistan is now pursuing a three-stage military strategy to weaken Baitullah's militia. The first part of the strategy began in June 2009. It involves bombing

and shelling Baitullah's positions to soften his fighters before sending ground forces to occupy his strongholds and block supplies. The government is rumored to have sought U.S. help in targeting Baitullah's militia with UAV attacks, and a number of these attacks have occurred in the area recently. The Pakistan Army is releasing daily reports about the bombing campaign, although there is no independent confirmation about its claims.

The second segment of the strategy is to neutralize Pakistani Taliban commanders such as Maulvi Nazir in the Wana area in South Waziristan and Hafiz Gul Bahadur in North Waziristan. The government is arranging and extending truces and peace accords with these leaders to prevent them from joining Baitullah Mehsud. Thus far, this goal has not yet materialized; in fact, both commanders have scrapped their peace deals with the government after accusing it of violating the accord's terms. Their main complaint is that the Pakistan government was cooperating with the United States in carrying out UAV attacks in both North and South Waziristan. They have made it clear that they will not revive the peace accords until an end to UAV strikes.²¹ Moreover, Hafiz Gul Bahadur has made an additional demand for the Pakistani military to end the military operation against Baitullah Mehsud.

The third element of the government's strategy is to create further divisions in the TTP and strengthen the splinter group led by all those opposed to Baitullah's faction. This effort is continuing even after the assassination of Qari Zain.

Conclusion

It will take time to revitalize Qari Zain's group under the command of Misbahuddin Mehsud. Some of his men are demoralized, while others want more government support. Nevertheless, it is now also a matter of honor for Qari Zain's men because they will want to avenge all those who were killed at the hands of Baitullah. The government will likely need to provide more support to Qari Zain's men to defeat Baitullah's forces. An initial government plan was

13 Omar Waraich, "Pakistan Slaying Reveals a Flawed Strategy," *Time Magazine*, June 25, 2009.

14 Ibid.

15 Iqbal Khattak, "Qari Zainuddin Killed, Baitullah Accused," *Daily Times*, June 24, 2009.

16 Hasan.

17 Personal correspondence, Maulana Mohammad Luqman, July 1, 2009.

18 Kathy Gannon, "Assassination in Pakistan Exposes Taliban Rifts," *Associated Press*, June 23, 2009.

19 Defections from Baitullah's group occurred mainly in the settled districts of Tank and Dera Ismail Khan, where the government had the means to help Qari Zain's men lure and frighten Mehsud tribesmen to switch sides. No precise figures are available, although Qari Zain claimed in his interviews before his assassination that his group was now dominant in Tank and Dera Ismail Khan.

20 Tahir Ali, "Govt-Backed Revolts Against TTP Fail to Deliver," *Pulse* [Islamabad], July 3-9, 2009.

21 "US Drones Throw Cold Water on Pak Plans," *Pulse*, July 3-9, 2009.

to initiate a ground offensive to secure territory from Baitullah's men in South Waziristan, and then to deploy Qari Zain's fighters to the secured areas to prevent the militia from returning. This plan is still in place even though it may not materialize in the timeframe that was originally anticipated.

As of July 20, the ground operation has not yet started. There are reports that the government is making frantic efforts to rally the tribes in both North and South Waziristan to its side in a bid to neutralize militant commanders Maulvi Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadur. Further complicating the matter, on July 11 the government instructed anti-Baitullah commander Turkistan Bhattani to close down his group's office in Tank city.²² The step may have been taken due to criticism that the government was erring by strengthening new militant commanders who would be difficult to control in the future. Nevertheless, there is no clear indication yet that the government and the military have discarded the option of organizing and strengthening groups of militants willing to challenge the power of Baitullah Mehsud and his allies.

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²² "Pro-Govt Militant Commander Turkestani Bhattani Instructed to Close Office in Tank," Express TV, July 11, 2009.