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Asia Times

Pakistan delivers a Taliban treat

Syed Saleem Shahzad

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With the Pakistan military to a large degree setting the rules of the game with Washington for reconciliation with the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban's supreme commander in Afghanistan, has become the army's first major delivery for the United States' end game in Afghanistan.

Baradar is reported to have been arrested several days ago in the southern port city of Karachi in a raid by Pakistani and US intelligence officials. He is now being interrogated by these officials, according to reports.

The White House, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon have made no comment.

However, a senior Taliban leader, speaking to Asia Times Online on the condition of anonymity, said, "This is not the first time that such a claim has been made about his arrest. Only four days ago, he was in contact with us."

Pakistani security officials have confirmed with ATol, also on the condition of anonymity, that Baradar was arrested in Baldia Town, Karachi.

Mullah Baradar has represented Taliban leader Mullah Omar in all peace talks with Washington, mediated by Saudi Arabia, in the past two years, and the idea of his arrest appears to be to split the Taliban cadre operating in southwestern Afghanistan. This, it is hoped, will isolate Mullah

Omar and put pressure on him to take part in negotiations. Mullah Omar has steadfastly claimed that he will not enter into any talks until all foreign troops leave Afghanistan.

This raises a difficult issue. Mullah Baradar is the only prominent Populzai (Durrani) tribe member in the predominantly Ghalzai Taliban cadre (rival tribes for centuries). If he agrees to cooperate with Pakistan and the US, it is by no means certain he will be able to exert any pressure on Taliban commanders in his individual capacity, that is, without Mullah Omar's backing.

At home in Karachi

Every winter over the past years, Mullah Baradar, along with other Taliban leaders and commanders, stayed in Lea Market in southern Karachi, from where they visited posher areas in Gulshan-e-Iqbal in eastern Karachi to collect donations from Islamic seminaries.

Inter-Services Intelligence was aware of their movements but never intercepted them because they were not considered a threat to the internal security of the country. The military did not want to mess with them as it was convinced that once foreign forces finally withdrew from Afghanistan, these Taliban would in one way or another be a part of the political set-up.

Now, though, Pakistan's relationship with Washington has evolved (see Pakistan's military sets Afghan terms Asia Times Online, February 9, 2010), and Pakistan simply caught the biggest fish around to help Washington start direct talks with the Taliban.

Nonetheless, this might to some extent be a case of smoke and mirrors as all such previous exercises have failed. As a result of the Taliban's strict code, once a powerful commander is apprehended, his influence is reduced to zero. A prime example of this occurred in 2003, when Mullah Abdul Razzaq, a former Taliban minister, was arrested in Pakistan. (See US turns to the Taliban Asia Times Online, June 14, 2003.) The authorities tried to use him to set up a channel of communication with the Taliban, but it was a non-starter as he no longer had clout. Razzaq was freed and subsequently rejoined the Taliban.

A former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Zaeef, is another example. The Americans have tried their best to use Zaeef in the reconciliation process, but without success.

Mullah Baradar's arrest could bring some limited benefits as he might divulge the whereabouts of some Taliban leaders, such as Mullah Hasan Rahmani and Mullah Jalil, who used to stay with him in Karachi.

However, getting any information on Mullah Omar will be difficult as he moves around a lot. Not even the Pakistan army, even though it is close to the US, will be so generous as to allow the arrest of Mullah Omar and thereby lose its biggest bargaining chip.

The notion of mounting pressure on Mullah Omar through Mullah Baradar could also backfire in that it might push Mullah Omar further towards al-Qaeda, which has raised impressive militias in

Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, especially in Mohmand and Bajaur tribal agencies and North Waziristan.