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Reuters

## Americans have direct access to Taliban No. 2

By Adam Entous Adam Entous Wed\_  
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U.S. investigators have recently been given more regular direct access to Pakistani-led interrogations of the Afghan Taliban's No. 2 leader, U.S. officials said on Wednesday, one month after his arrest was announced.

Pakistani limitations on U.S. access to Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar have been a source of tension since he was captured in the port city of Karachi. The joint operation that nabbed the Taliban's top military commander has been so shrouded in secrecy that U.S. and Pakistani officials could not even say with certainty what day it took place.

It was unclear whether the direct U.S. access, disclosed by U.S. officials who requested anonymity, was yielding useful intelligence.

But the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, held out Baradar's arrest as a potential game-changer, telling reporters separately that it "seems to have shaken the confidence of some of the Afghan Taliban leadership." McChrystal did not discuss the interrogation issue.

Previously undisclosed details about the joint U.S.-Pakistani raid, believed to have taken place in late January, shed new light on what has been described in Washington as a major intelligence and propaganda coup that could open divisions within Taliban ranks and weaken a deadly insurgency after eight years of war.

But many questions remain unanswered, such as whether Pakistan's powerful intelligence service was turning against its long-time Taliban allies, or took action against Baradar to ensure its interests would be represented in any future reconciliation process.

"We see indications that they are trying to figure out what way ahead that they should plot," McChrystal told reporters in a conference call from Afghanistan, referring to the tentative response of Taliban leaders to Baradar's arrest.

Mark Sedwill, a British diplomat serving as the senior NATO civilian official in Afghanistan, said: "In a sense I think they (Afghan Taliban leaders) are recalibrating because they don't yet know where they stand. That's a good thing -- we want them to be uncertain about their future."

"This is going to be a real poker game with these guys over the next few months," Sedwill added, referring to the possibility that some Taliban leaders might opt to reach out for a deal.

#### VALUE INTELLIGENCE?

Pakistan has balked at handing over Baradar either to the United States or to Afghanistan for interrogation, and some U.S. officials have complained privately about a lack of direct access to the secret interrogation sessions.

FBI director Robert Mueller was in Islamabad late last month to discuss the issue and to press for more access for U.S. investigators.

"There is direct access to him," a U.S. official said on condition of anonymity.

He described the level of direct access of late as "definitely more than minimal."

"More information is coming out of these discussions," the official added, though he declined to say whether any of the information was useful to the U.S. government or military.

Initially, U.S. officials characterized the intelligence value as minimal. But a military official said on Wednesday that a "good" amount of information was flowing to commanders and "the hope is this is a precursor of things to come."

#### DUMB LUCK?

New information from U.S. officials about the Karachi operation cast doubt on what some observers termed the "dumb luck theory" of how Baradar was captured -- that he was swept up in a raid targeting others.

"This wasn't a case of simple happenstance," said a U.S. counterterrorism official familiar with the operation.

"There was intelligence that came together and made this a Baradar-related operation. There were strong indications in advance that the capture would involve, if not him, at least some of his associates," the official added.

The arrest was not disclosed because "it took a while to identify Baradar" conclusively, the counterterrorism official said.

U.S. officials and analysts are still debating Pakistan's motives. The arrest followed Afghan President Hamid Karzai's announcement of a high profile effort aimed at reconciling with Taliban leaders.

There have been conflicting reports that Baradar, the former top Taliban military commander, might have been talking to Kabul, and that may have led to his arrest.