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More of the same for Baitullah's fighters

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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ISLAMABAD - With speculation still swirling over the fate of the leader of the Tehrik-i-Taliban [Pakistan](#) (TTP), Baitullah Mehsud, possibly killed in a US Predator drone attack in the South Waziristan tribal area last Wednesday, the viability of his group has come into question.

Some analysts say the TTP, the main Taliban militant umbrella group in Pakistan primarily in conflict with the central government, will fall apart and that its various groups will operate as stand-alone outfits.

The Pakistan army's Inter-Services Public Relations Department has also weighed in with some stories about the TTP, which need to be treated cautiously, given the department's dubious record in the days following the drone attack.

It reported the deaths of Waliur Rahman, Baitullah's deputy and spokesman, as well as that of Hakimullah Mehsud, a potential successor to Baitullah. The men were said to have died in a shootout during a meeting to discuss the succession.

Both men have since personally contacted the media to dismiss the stories. The Taliban have said they will shortly present proof that Baitullah is alive.

An evolving militant umbrella

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Taliban Movement of Pakistan) embraces militants from Afghanistan and Pakistan who have pledged their allegiance to Taliban leader Mullah Omar. They therefore call themselves Taliban, although they have imbibed al-Qaeda's Takfiri ideology, which means the state of Pakistan is *Darul Harb* (a place of war) and the Pakistan army, being an ally of the [United States](#), is heretical.

The group was founded in the South Waziristan and North Waziristan tribal areas on the border with Afghanistan in 2007, and spread quickly to other areas. The TTP does not have a formal infrastructure, such as a central treasury, arsenal or war room, despite this being

reported by the Inter-Services Public Relations Department.

Instead, various warlords with independent resources and strategies work for the same cause and share the same ideology. Occasionally, they cooperate with one another. For instance, Qari Zafar, a leader of the Pakistani militant group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, has collaborated with Baitullah.

A big player in the TTP orbit is Mullah Fazlullah - nicknamed "Radio Mullah" and the leader of the pro-Taliban Tehrik-Nifaz-i-Shariat-i-Mohammadi in Malakand Agency.

Baitullah sent some fighters to aid Fazlullah in the early stages of the Pakistan military's operations in his area in 2007 and also to Swat this year. But Fazlullah essentially fought the army independently using his own resources.

Qari Ziaur Rahman, the commander-in-chief of the Taliban in Kunar and Nuristan provinces in Afghanistan and Bajaur Agency and Mohamand Agency in Pakistan, is also an anti-establishment element. He set up links with Baitullah after the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Operation Lion Heart of 2008 which targeted insurgents in the Kunar region. The interaction has been limited, however.

Through Hakimullah Mehsud, Baitullah's cousin, Baitullah has relatively direct coordination with the Taliban in Dera Adam Khel, a town in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, and the Orakzai and Kurram agencies in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan.

The binding force between these various groups is ideology and it is possible that should Baitullah be dead, they will not select a new chief and work even more independently, but pledging Mullah Omar as their figurehead and al-Qaeda as their ideology. There is no chance Fazlullah will lay down his arms.

The fact is, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan is already a shadowy, loose nexus of essentially independent groups without too many formal structures and hierarchies. As such it is a difficult group to pin down, let alone destroy, and this will remain the case with or without Baitullah.