

A Post-Mortem Analysis of Mullah Nazir: The “Good Taliban” Killed in a CIA Drone Strike

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A CIA Predator or Reaper drone killed the powerful South Waziristani Taliban leader Mullah Nazir and five to seven of his top deputies on the night of January 2 near Angor Adda, South Waziristan. The incident is a contentious start to the 2013 drone campaign in Pakistan’s FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Agencies) region. As is increasingly the case to avoid civilian casualties, the drone strike took place while Nazir was traveling in an SUV. [1]

While seemingly a strategic victory, the strike could cause tension with Pakistan because Nazir’s South Waziristan based Taliban faction had declared a truce with the Pakistani government. Like his Taliban allies Gul Hafez Bahadur and Jalaladin Haqqani, this made him a “good Taliban” in the eyes of the Pakistanis. By contrast, the Pakistanis have been engaged in a bloody war with the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, Pakistani Taliban) faction based in North Waziristan and led by Baitullah Mahsud—who was killed by a drone on August 5, 2009—and his successor Hakimullah Mahsud. The Pakistanis have worked hard to bring leaders like Nazir to the negotiating table and have used them to create a complex web of truces that have brought a modicum of stability to this war-torn, tribal region.

The Rise of a “Good Taliban”

Mullah Nazir (often known by the higher religious title of Maulvi) was born in 1975 in the village of Angor Adda, which straddles the border between the Pakistani province of South Waziristan and the Afghan province of Paktika. Nazir’s father, Abdul Salam, fought in the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s while Nazir attended *madrassa-s* in Birmal, Paktika and Wana, South Waziristan. Nazir joined the Taliban when they swept to power in the border region in 1996. After the Taliban regime was overthrown in Afghanistan during 2001’s Operation Enduring Freedom, Nazir fled to South Waziristan. He became involved in providing *melmastia* (sanctuary) for wealthy al-Qaeda members and allied Uzbekistani jihadis who fled to the region to escape the U.S.-led Coalition forces. When the Pakistanis invaded South Waziristan in the following year to hunt down al-Qaeda foreigners at the behest of the Americans, Nazir joined with Pakistani Taliban leader Nek Muhammad in fighting them off.

In 2004 Nazir was arrested by the Pakistani Army, but was released soon thereafter under the auspices of the notorious Shakai Peace Treaty, which was seen by the Americans as capitulation to Taliban leader Nek Muhammad. Based on this experience, Nazir subsequently began to create his own 3,000 man *lashkar* (tribal militia). He used his newfound authority to set up jihadi training camps in Wana, the largest city in South Waziristan, which became his headquarters. Fighters from these camps, both foreigners and local Pashtuns, then made raids across the border against Coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Nazir remained largely unknown outside of Pakistan despite all the activity, until his followers became engaged in a feud with Uzbekistani militants belonging to a splinter group known as the Islamic Jihad Group. The Uzbek militants were accused in March 2007 of killing local Waziri Pashtun elders. In response, Nazir's followers attacked their positions killing as many 200 Uzbek extremists—one fifth of their total force (*The Guardian*, April 5, 2007). [2] The Pakistanis trumpeted this 'red on red' violence as proof that the Shakai Peace Accords and other treaties had borne fruit. The Pakistanis proclaimed the campaign against the Uzbeks was "the result of the agreements the government made with tribal people, in which they pledged to expel foreigners and now they are doing it" (*Arab News*, April 5, 2007). The Pakistanis claimed that the moderate or "good Taliban" were turning on the foreign extremists linked to al-Qaeda, as agreed upon in the Shakai Accords. The Pakistanis also claimed to have supported Nazir's campaign against the Uzbek terrorists with weapons, funds and artillery support. [3]

When the North Waziristan-based TTP terrorist group led by Baitullah Mahsud began an open war with Pakistan, sending waves of suicide bombers against Pakistani targets, Nazir faithfully adhered to his 2007 and 2009 peace treaties with the government. He even had Mahsudi tribesmen living in the Wana region expelled in 2012 after he survived a suicide bombing attack that he blamed on Baitullah Mahsudi's TTP (*The News* [Islamabad], January 4). Pakistan has criticized the killing of Mullah Nazir and called it "illegal, counterproductive, unacceptable and a violation of its territorial integrity" (*Daily Times* [Lahore], January 5).

One Pakistani officer described the tension between the Americans and the Pakistanis over the issue: stating "The [drone] program is making things very difficult for us. Nazir [was] the sole remaining major militant leader willing to be an ally" (Reuters, January 3). It was similarly reported that the Pakistani security establishment considered him to be a friendly Taliban leader who the army could work with (*The News*, January 4).

The government's greatest fear is that Nazir's faction and his Ahmedzai tribe will blame them for the death of their leader and take up arms against the Pakistani military; it is well known in the FATA region that Pakistan aids and abets the drone strikes despite their public protestations against them. This would seriously destabilize South Waziristan, which has been relatively calm for the last three years in comparison to Mahsud-controlled North Waziristan.

For all of its allure, the premise that Mullah Nazir was a "Good Taliban" clumsily killed by self-interested Americans has its detractors most notably among the Americans themselves who claim to have had valid regions for killing him. An analysis of their argument will demonstrate that there was far more to Nazir than the simplistic "good Taliban" versus "bad Taliban" paradigm fostered by the Pakistanis.

Mullah Nazir, the al-Qaeda Linked Militant

As previously stated, Nazir grew up raised by a father who waged jihad against the Russian *kafirs* (infidels) in Afghanistan. Nazir similarly fought across the border in the ranks of the Taliban in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. He was intimately involved in the Islamic Emirate (as the Taliban regime was known) and developed close ties with foreign Arabs who fought alongside the Taliban in Bin Laden's 055 Brigade. When the al-Qaeda Arabs fled to South Waziristan in 2001, Nazir offered them sanctuary and bases for training. These Arabs had considerable cash and dedication and played a key role in adding a terrorist edge to the mounting Taliban insurgency; for example, they imported the alien tactic of suicide bombing. [4] Although the Shakai Peace Accords called upon the Taliban to turn over foreigners, Nazir continued to flaunt the accord's stipulations by protecting them.

Nazir and his followers turned on a faction of the foreigners in South Waziristan, the Uzbek jihadis, in March 2007 after blaming them for two crimes: killing Ahmedzai elders and, most interestingly, killing al-Qaeda Arabs. [5] It was the killing of an al-Qaeda associated Saudi skaykh named Asadullah in particular that infuriated Nazir and his followers. Thus, far from turning on all foreigners as Islamabad disingenuously claimed, Nazir and his tribesmen actually fought a sub-group of Uzbeks to gain *badal* (revenge) on them for killing the al-Qaeda members. Imtiaz Gul clearly stated at the time; "there is no sign the [Nazir] offensive has targeted Arabs associated with al-Qaeda." [6]

While many rank-and-file Taliban have a local perspective and simply want to expel the American 'infidels' from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Nazir hinted in a 2011

interview that he would attack NATO interests “all over the world.” He also stated “al-Qaeda and the Taliban are one and the same. At an operational level we might have different strategies, but at the policy level we are one and the same.” As for the Americans in neighboring Afghanistan, he rejected calls for peace and said “At the moment, the Americans want breathing space. We don’t want to allow them any at all.” [7]

Nazir has translated such rhetoric into reality; his fighters have wreaked havoc in the neighboring Afghan provinces of Paktika, Zabul and Helmand where they have burnt schools, killed NATO and Afghan troops with small arms and IEDs, executed pro-government khans, and established Taliban shadow courts. Nazir also facilitated the transfer of so-called “Punjabi Taliban” to Afghanistan where they have played an increasing role as terrorist/insurgents (Reuters, May 30, 2010). In addition, he was closely tied to the Haqqani network which was responsible for many bloody outrages in Kabul and eastern Afghanistan (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], January 4).

Mullah Nazir additionally banned Pakistani government officials from carrying out polio vaccinations in his territory after announcing “In the garb of these vaccination campaigns, the U.S. and its allies are running their spying networks in FATA which has brought death and destruction on them in the form of drone strikes” (*Dawn* [Karachi], June 25, 2012).

The United States has thus described Nazir as “someone who has a great deal of blood on his hands” (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], January 4). One U.S. official summed up the charges against the Taliban leader as follows: “Commander Nazir and his men were directly involved in planning and executing cross-border attacks against U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan and in providing protection for al-Qaeda fighters in South Waziristan” (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], January 4).

The CIA, acting in a counter-insurgent role, launched 52 strikes on Nazir’s territory, including two failed attempts to assassinate him and one that killed his brother. Several top al-Qaeda leaders were killed in these strikes, including Ilyas Kashmiri, Abu Khabab al-Masri, Osama al-Kini, Shaykh Ahmad Salim Swedan and Abu Zaid al Iraqi.

With plans for a U.S. withdrawal of 66,000 U.S. troops from Afghanistan by 2014, it was clear that Nazir was a threat to the unstable southeast of the country and had to be eliminated prior to their departure. While the Pakistanis may mourn his loss, NATO and the Afghan government will hardly miss an insurgent leader who certainly qualifies in their books as a “bad Taliban.”

At least one Pakistani author and specialist on the Taliban, Imtiaz Gul, agrees with NATO and accused Nazir of having played a “double game” by offering sanctuary to al-Qaeda members who brought terrorism to Pakistan. Gul has summed up the Pakistani hypocrisy of creating *ad hoc* treaties/capitulations with terrorists who attack their neighbors writing: “Both Pakistan and the United States should be pleased he is gone because he was undermining Pakistan’s stated position of disrupting, denying and degrading al-Qaeda” (*Telegraph*, January 3).

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Notes

1. Brian Glyn Williams, “The CIA’s Covert Drone War in Pakistan, 2004-2010: The History of an Assassination Campaign,” *Studies in Terrorism and Conflict*, Volume 33, Issue 10, (2010), 12.
2. For more on the Uzbeks of Waziristan see: Brian Glyn Williams, “Talibanistan: The History of a Trans-National Terrorist Sanctuary,” *Civil Wars*, Volume 10, Issue 1, (2008), 6.
3. Imtiaz Gul, *The Most Dangerous Place: Pakistan’s Lawless Frontier*, (Penguin Books, 2011), 55-60.
4. Brian Glyn Williams, “Mullah Omar’s Missiles: A Field Report on Suicide Bombers in Afghanistan,” *Middle East Policy*, Volume 15, Issue 4, (Winter 2008), 4.
5. Vern Liebel, “Pushtuns, Tribalism, Leadership, Islam,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Volume 18, Issue 3, (September 2007), 3.
6. Imtiaz Gul, *The Most Dangerous Place: Pakistan’s Lawless Frontier*, (2011), 60.
7. Syed Saleem Shahzad “Taliban and al-Qaeda: Friends in arms,” *Asia Times*, May 5, 2011; Anna Mahjar-Barducci, “Pakistani Journalist Killed for Exposing Al Qaeda’s Links to Pakistan’s Armed Forces,” *Gatestone Institute*, June 8, 2011.