

The execution of Ebu Zer

Turkey's most high-profile jihadist was killed by the Taliban in Pakistan's tribal areas. *Jane's* examines the impact his death will have on Turkish support for jihadist activity in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

KEY POINTS

- Serdal Erbasi (also known as Ebu Zer), Turkey's most high-profile jihadist, has been killed in Pakistan's tribal areas after being accused of killing two fellow foreign fighters in a dispute over money.

- Turkish jihadist websites suggested that the Taliban court's decision to execute him was unjust and had agitated other foreign fighters in the tribal areas.

- Ebu Zer's death could have a serious impact on Turkish support for jihadist activity in Afghanistan and Pakistan as he appears to have been extensively involved in raising money and recruiting fighters.

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Ebu Zer, right, and Ebu Ömer, leaders of the Azeri-Turkish group Taifetul Mansura (victorious sect).

The death of Ebu Zer, Turkey's most high-profile jihadist, at the hands of fellow Islamist militants in Pakistan's tribal areas could undermine Turkish support for the insurgency in the region.

Ebu Zer was the kunya (nom de guerre) of a Turkish man called Serdal Erbaşı. Very little is known about his background, although Turkish media reports published after his death said he was born in the city of Konya in central Turkey.

Turkish jihadist websites said he had travelled to fight with separatists in Chechnya 16 years before his death, meaning that he would have been involved in the 1994-1996 Russo-Chechen war.

The conflict attracted numerous Turks, many of them 'evlad i fatih han' (the descendants of immigrants from the former Ottoman Empire territories in the Balkans and Caucasus), who volunteered to fight in what they regarded as their ancestral homelands. Ebu Zer may have served in the ranks of

the Jamaat Osmanly, a unit comprised of Turkish fighters. Ebu Zer also fought in the Russo-Chechen war that broke out in 1999. Pro-rebel websites have published numerous photographs of him with fellow militants, including one showing him sitting next to Dokka Umarov, who became the leader of the significantly weakened Chechen insurgents in June 2006.

Ebu Zer also appeared in several videos posted on jihadist websites in an attempt to drum up Turkish support for the militants. In 2008, for example, he appeared with a Chechen commander identified as Seyid Ömer in an Azzam Medya video to declare they would fight on against the Russians.

Victorious sect

Ebu Zer appears to have been back in Turkey when this video was released. In a written 'interview' posted on Turkish jihadist websites in April 2009, he explained that he and some of his colleagues had returned to

Turkey in the summer of 2007. They tried to get back to the North Caucasus the following year, but the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia made it impossible to cross the border.

He said in the interview that, having returned to Turkey, the group decided to travel to Afghanistan instead. "Muslims are the same for us everywhere. They are the same here as the Chechens except for their different clothes. The same thing is happening here as in Chechnya: they are destroying honour," he explained. "We will keep our jihad going here for a while, but it does not mean we have forgotten Chechnya."

Ebu Zer claimed that a Turkish and Azeri group called Taifetul Mansura (victorious sect) had been established under the command of the Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. "We met with the emirs appointed by Mullah Omar and we started our group under the Taliban," he said. "All of our comrades came here ... Azeris and Turks

came here together. I am calling Azeris and Turks: do not continue living under your unfree conditions. Come here and fight for God."

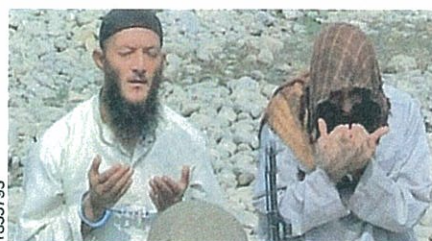
The photograph accompanying the interview showed Ebu Zer sitting next to another individual identified as Ebu Ömer. This image and the transcript of the interview turned out to have been taken from a video that was released later in 2009 by the jihadist media organisation Elif Medya. The video identified Ebu Ömer as an Azerbaijani and the emir (leader) of the group and Ebu Zer as its komutan (commander).

In 2009, Elif Medya released 'martyrdom' statements announcing that Ebu Ömer and other Turkish, Azeri and Kurdish members of Taifetul Mansura had been killed in action.

Taifetul Mansura's collaboration with Elif Medya suggested it had links to the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), an Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan splinter faction based in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal area, and its German Taliban offshoot. All three groups were promoted by Elif Medya, which was run by a Turk known as Salahaddin al-Türki. In April 2010, jihadist websites reported that Salahaddin al-Türki had been killed along with Eric Breining (alias Abdul Ghaffar), a German convert to Islam who had appeared in both IJU and German Taliban videos.

Support network

In January 2010, the Turkish press reported that Ebu Zer had been arrested by Turkish police along with around 150 other suspects in the country's largest security operation against jihadists to date. The press reporting described him as a senior leader in a Turkish Al-Qaeda network that was disseminating jihadist propaganda and sending recruits, money and other resources to insurgents fighting in Afghanistan. This crackdown on what appeared to be a jihadist support network followed an Al-Qaeda appeal for Turkish cash in June 2009. "We consider the Muslims in Turkey our brothers and sisters, as the Muslim community is a unified one," the now deceased senior Al-Qaeda leader Mustafa Abu al-Yazid said in an audio recording released to jihadist websites. "We here on the battlefield of Afghanistan, are in strong lack of money... Please fear God and adhere to



Final prayers: Ebu Zer and an unidentified man raise their hands in prayer before being shot.

jihad with money. Please perform such a religious obligation." The Turkish translation of this Arabic speech was branded as a Taifetul Mansura production.

However, there was no further reporting of Ebu Zer's case and he subsequently appeared in two more videos posted on jihadist websites. One appears to have first emerged in September 2010 and showed Ebu Zer with a group of fighters as they trekked across snow covered mountains and fired 107 mm rockets into a valley. The weather conditions suggested it was filmed during the winter. Ebu Zer claimed the target was a US base in the northeastern Afghan province of Kunar.

The other video was purportedly filmed in Waziristan, in Pakistan, and featured Ebu Zer and a masked fighter showing off various weapons and saying how much they cost (for example, USD300 for a Markov pistol, USD2,000 for a PK machine gun). He implored Turkish Muslims to spare no expense in contributing funds to his fighters so they could buy the weapons they needed to wage jihad. Neither of the videos were branded with the logo of a jihadist media organisation or attributed to a specific group.

Execution

Confirmation that Ebu Zer was not in Turkish custody came on 21 June, when his death was first reported. A statement circulated on Turkish jihadist websites announced: "Ebu Zer, who came to be known with the Chechen jihad and later participated in the Afghan jihad, has been reported to have been executed by Taliban in the Waziristan-Orakzai region for being held responsible for the murder of two muhajir [foreign] fighters."

The statement, which was released by a Turkish jihadist media organisation called

Gazavat Media, refuted the Turkish press reports claiming that Ebu Zer was an Al-Qaeda commander. It added that he had left Taifetul Mansura because of differences with its leadership and that he had then formed a small Turkish group of his own. However, he faced a leadership challenge when two of his old associates from Chechnya – Samil Dagistanli and Ismail Azeri – "rose against him". The statement said: "Two months ago, the money sent to Afghanistan from elsewhere caused problems within the group, which was already fragmented into two factions."

The Gazavat statement said Samil Dagistanli and Ismail Azeri had been killed in mysterious circumstances. A Taliban court investigated their deaths, identified Ebu Zer and two of his men as the culprits and ruled that they should be executed. Gazavat Media said its sources had confirmed that all three were killed in a 'military village' in Waziristan. Photographs were subsequently posted on jihadist websites showing Ebu Zer and another man being shot dead.

Gazavat Media implied that it was an unjust verdict, saying its analysts "emphasise the possibility that the decision to execute Ebu Zer might not have been reached through a thorough investigation." It said: "Certain groups with whom Ebu Zer had fallen out with were playing 'dirty games' by way of provocation and disinformation." It enigmatically hinted that his death had caused discord among foreign fighters, saying: "The winds of provocation that blow through the lands of jihad this time blow among the migrant mujahideen in Afghanistan."

This statement is a rare example of the façade of unity presented by the jihadists in the tribal areas breaking down to reveal a squabble over power and money. With the death of a high-profile Turkish jihadist commander, this may well discourage sympathisers in Turkey from sending money or travelling to the Pakistani tribal areas to fight. ■

FURTHER ANALYSIS

■ *Tribal Turks - Turkish jihadists travel to fight in Afghanistan, Jane's Intelligence Review, 17 June 2011.*