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Al-Qaeda No. 3 Yazid reported killed by U.S. drone

By Greg Miller and Craig Whitlock
Tuesday, June 1, 2010; 2:55 PM

Al-Qaeda's third-ranking operative, an Egyptian who was a founding member of the terrorist network and a key conduit to Osama bin Laden, has been killed in Pakistan, according to a statement Monday from al-Qaeda that U.S. intelligence officials believe is accurate.

A U.S. official said there is "strong reason" to believe that Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, known as Sheik Saeed al-Masri, apparently was killed by a CIA drone strike in Pakistan's tribal belt within the past two weeks.

The official described it as a significant victory against the terrorist group.

"Al-Masri was the group's chief operating officer, with a hand in everything from finances to operational planning," the official said. "He was also the organization's prime conduit to bin Laden and Zawahiri," he added, referring to al-Qaeda's No. 2, Ayman al-Zawahiri. "He was key to al-Qaeda's command and control."

Yazid, 54, was an original member of al-Qaeda's Shura leadership council and an al-Qaeda commander for Afghanistan, and served as an adviser to bin Laden for more than 15 years. More recently, he was the group's chief organizational manager, in charge of finances and logistics, as well as a liaison to the Taliban and other extremist groups.

Yazid was part of the Egyptian contingent that has dominated al-Qaeda's leadership since the network's founding. He and Zawahiri served time in prison in the early 1980s for their role as conspirators in the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.

The 9/11 Commission identified Yazid as al-Qaeda's "chief financial manager" and said he opposed the Sept. 11, 2001, hijackings "because he feared the U.S. response to the attack." He stayed loyal to bin Laden, however, and took on an increasingly important role in the network after the deaths of other senior leaders in recent years.

Previous reports of Yazid's death proved unfounded. Some Pakistani military officials said he was killed in August 2008 in the Bajaur tribal area. Fourteen months later, Pakistani media reported he was killed in a drone strike in North Waziristan. Not long after, Yazid appeared

VIDEO



Video: Al-Qaeda No. 3 Yazid reported dead

In what could be one of the hardest blows to al-Qaeda since the U.S. campaign against the terrorist organization began, the group's No. 3, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, known as Sheik Saeed al-Masri, is believed to have been killed by a U.S. Predator drone strike.

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in videos posted on the Internet by al-Qaeda.

One senior Pakistani official sounded a note of caution, saying: "There have been so many wrong calls, bad calls, on him before, we're not confirming it now."

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But the U.S. official said of the latest report: "In terms of level of confidence, it's very high."

The al-Qaeda statement released Monday did not give details of Yazid's death. Although many of the network's members have been incorrectly reported dead in the past by U.S. and Pakistani officials, al-Qaeda's official announcements regarding the "martyrdom" of its senior leaders have been highly reliable.

Two Pakistani intelligence officials and one security official said Tuesday morning that authorities were still trying to confirm

Yazid's death. An intelligence official said they "suspect" he might have been killed in a major missile attack May 12. Eighteen missiles were fired that day in the Datta Khel area of North Waziristan, killing 28 militants, the official said. The strikes appeared to have been targeting Hafiz Gul Bahadur, a top Pakistani Taliban leader.

"Some foreigners were also killed in that attack. We are gathering information to ascertain the circumstance," the official said.

The death of Yazid would represent one of the most significant blows against al-Qaeda since the CIA began a major escalation in the pace of drone strikes in 2008, which has been accelerated under President Obama.

Yazid went into hiding after the Sept. 11 attacks and waited nearly six years to reemerge, appearing in a May 2007 video in which he was described as the commander of al-Qaeda's operations in Afghanistan. Security analysts said he has overseen the group's global fundraising efforts, as well as recruitment.

Unlike his fellow Egyptian Zawahiri, who has a reputation as a polarizing figure, Islamic radicals have described Yazid as an amiable and popular leader within the movement who was able to serve as a bridge between factions.

millergreg@washpost.com

whitlockc@washpost.com

Staff writer Karen DeYoung contributed to this report.

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