

# A Profile of Omar Khalid Khurasani: Emir of Jamaatal Ahrar

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## Introduction

Few commanders of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have managed to keep up the momentum of jihadi activities in both tribal areas and settled districts of Pakistan as Abdul Wali alias Omar Khalid Khurasani. Wali more commonly known by his nom de guerre Omar Khalid Khurasani started his jihadi career as the commander of TTP Mohmand agency, and remained part of TTP's central Shura. After the death of Hakeemullah Mehsud in November 2013, the then commander of TTP, Khalid had a fall out with new TTP Emir Fazalullah<sup>1</sup> and went on to establish his own faction of TTP which he named Jamaat-ul Ahrar<sup>2</sup> which he still heads even after re-joining hands with his former bête noir Fazalullah<sup>3</sup>. Based in Mohmand district of tribal areas of Pakistan (Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan aka FATA), 34-year Khalid is considered as a rising star at the Pakistani jihad scene. After surviving multiple military operations targeting his bases in Mohmand district he now commands thousands of jihadis<sup>4</sup>.

Khalid belongs to a family where jihad is the only tradition. Born in a small village called Kandharo in Safi subdivision of Mohmand district in 1980 (Safi tribe), Khalid briefly attended his village school and madrasah and then for advanced religious education he studied at madrasahs in Karachi in late 1980s and early 1990s<sup>5</sup>. In Karachi he joined Kashmiri jihadi organization Harkat ul Mujahedeen<sup>6</sup>. Though he never managed to land into Indian Kashmir insurgency but remained part of HuM till the time he joined Afghan Taliban ranks<sup>7</sup>.

In a rare interview to TTP's official quarterly jihadi magazine *Ihya-e-Khilafat*, Khalid described his family background. He said that jihadi traditions run in the family as his grandfather fought against the British during the Third Afghan War (1919-1920), whereas his father had fought against the

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<sup>1</sup> After developing differences after the death of former Emir Hakeemullah Mehsud in December 2013, the TTP leadership remained divided over the selection of new Emir. After the selection of Fazalullah as the new Emir the differences grew further and resulting in ouster of Omar Khalid. For details see, Ami Mir, "TTP split grows as Fazalullah expels head of Mohmand Agency unit", *The News Islamabad*, September 5, 2014

<sup>2</sup> "Pakistan Taliban faction announce split, new leader", *AFP News*, September 4, 2014

<sup>33</sup> Bill Roggio, "Pakistani jihadist groups, Lashkar-i-Islam merge into the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan", *The Long War Journal*, March 12, 2015, available at: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/pakistani-jihadist-groups-lashkar-i-islam-merge-into-the-movement-of-the-taliban-in-pakistan.php>

<sup>4</sup> "Special Interview of Omar Khalid Khurasani", *Ihya-e-Khilafat* (Official TTP magazine), September 2013 Issue, available at:

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.6-11

<sup>6</sup> HUM in early 1990s was the premier Jihadi terrorist organization active in Indian Kashmir Islamist insurgency. HUM was commanded by Fazal ur Rehman Khalil, one of the co-signatory of Fatwa against the Jews and Crusaders alongside Osama Bin Laden in 1998. HUM operatives were also involved in kidnapping and beheading two Norwegian tourists in Indian Kashmir, and hijacked Indian Airline Flight from Kathmandu, Nepal to Kandahar in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan in 2000. The operation resulted in the release of three of HUM's prominent terrorists from Indian jail (Ahmad Omar Said Shaikh, Mushtaq Zargar and Masoud Azhar).

<sup>7</sup> Op Cit. *Ihya-e-Khilafat* p.6

Soviet Union during 'Afghan Jihad' (1979-1989). Following the family norms and jihadi values Khalid started his jihadi career from Afghanistan in 1996. He joined the Taliban forces of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Afghan Taliban) and posted in Kunar province close to his home district on the Pakistani side of the border. Khalid is one typical case study of jihadis in action in Pakistan, with family traditions, training and indoctrination at Al-Qaeda-run training camps operational during Taliban rule period (1996-2001) and finally turning against his own country. After returning to his home district after the fall of Taliban regime in early 2002, Khalid started working for a magazine "*Mohmand Adbi Guncha*"<sup>8</sup>, published and circulated in Mohmand district<sup>9</sup>.

Omar Khalid continued to work alongside Afghan Taliban after the resurgence of Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan after 2004. He fought US and ISAF forces at different fronts in Kunar and Nuristan provinces but finally restricted jihadi activities to Pakistan after Islamist insurgency started to take off in Pakistan's tribal areas under the leadership of Abdullah Mehsud and Nek Mohammad Wazir in 2004<sup>10</sup>. Khalid pledged allegiance to Baitullah Mehsud, the founder of TTP in 2006. Baitullah formerly laid the foundations of TTP in August 2007 but earlier to this was involved in battling Pakistani security forces in North and South Waziristan districts of tribal areas<sup>11</sup>. The Pakistani security forces' operations were targeted to apprehend on-the-run Al-Qaeda high profile leaders and rank and files in tribal areas where the Al-Qaeda had found an ally in Baitullah and his predecessor tribal jihadi leaders, who were up front in providing sanctuaries to Al-Qaeda high command. Baitullah nominated Khalid as the TTP commander for Mohmand district where he had managed to develop strong ties with Arabs, Uzbeks, Chechens and Chinese Uighurs.

### Creation of Jamaat-ul Ahrar

Khalid established Jamaat ul Ahrar after developing differences with TTP Emir Fazalullah in September 2014<sup>12</sup>. Fazalullah the Emir of Swat chapter of TTP rose to become Emir of TTP after the death of Hakeemullah Mehsud in a drone strike in South Waziristan in November 2013<sup>13</sup>.

Key TTP commanders who joined hands with Jamaatul Ahrar and become part of its Shura are Qari Shakeel Haqqani from Charsadda, Maulana Yasin from Swat, Mufti Mishbah from Peshawar districts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, and Qari Ismail from Khyber district, Maulana Abdullah from Bajaur district, Maulana Haider and Mansoor Nazim from Orakzai districts of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Translation: Mohmand Literary Flower

<sup>9</sup> Not to forget the career of Masoud Azhar of HUM, who simultaneously worked as journalist and jihadi, and later founded his own jihadi organization Jaish-e-Mohammad after freeing from Indian jail as a result of HUM's hijacking of Indian Airline flight in 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Op Cit. Ihya-e-Khilafat, p.6-11

<sup>11</sup> "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)", South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP)

<sup>12</sup> Zahir Khan Sherazi, "TTP Chief Mullah Fazalullah ousts commander Umar Khorasani", Dawn, September 7, 2014, available at: <http://www.dawn.com/news/1130446>

<sup>13</sup> Jijo Jacob, "US Drone Strike Kills Pakistani Taliban Head Hakeemullah Mehsud", *International Business Times*, November 2, 2013, available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/drone-strike-kills-pakistan-taliban-hakimullah-mehsud-518996>

<sup>14</sup> "TTP militants form new splinter group 'Jamaatul Ahrar'", *Pakistan Today*, Islamabad, August 26, 2014, available at: <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2014/08/26/national/ttp-militants-form-new-splinter-group-jamatul-ahrar/>

Jamaat-ul Ahrar's official (previously TTP's) monthly magazine *Ihya-e-Khilafat* describes the group's ideology as:

- Imposition of Sharia law in Pakistan
- Armed struggle for the establishment of Caliphate in Pakistan
- Establishment of rule replicating the era of the Companions
- Jihad to free Jerusalem, and Hijaz
- Establishment of one global Caliphate by uniting all Muslim countries
- Efforts to set free all jihadi prisoners
- Jihad against the apostates
- Helping Muslims anywhere in need<sup>15</sup>

Khurasani accused Fazalullah and his allied commanders for deviating from the TTP ideology. Fazalullah being in Afghanistan and missed Shura council's meetings slammed the decision of Khurasani and called him a traitor and deviator. He said, Khurasani was "*conspiring against the Emirates of Afghanistan Emir Mullah Muhammad Omar, and having links to shadow militant organizations*"<sup>16</sup>. All Taliban groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan consider Mullah Omar as the ceremonial head and pledge allegiance to his authority though virtually all act independently.

Khurasani managed to lure in newly emerged Punjabi Taliban branch (involved in Islamabad Court Complex attack in March 2014)<sup>17</sup> Ahrar ul Hind led by Qasim Khurasani and Junad-e-Hafza another shadowy organization based in Punjab<sup>18</sup>. Ahrar ul Hind is now merged into Jamaat ul Ahrar<sup>19</sup>.

Jamaat ul Ahrar's spokesperson Ehsanullah Ehsan condemned the Noble Award committee for choosing Malala Yousafzai for Noble Peace Prize 2014, calling her "*an agent of non-believers*"<sup>20</sup>. While showing its disdain for the US, the Jamaat ul Ahrar announced to celebrate the 13<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "Airaz-o-Maqasid Jamaat-ul Ahrar (Aims and Objectives of Jamaat-ul Ahrar)", *Ihya-e-Khilafat*, November 2014, available at: [www.ihyaekhilafat.com](http://www.ihyaekhilafat.com)

<sup>16</sup> Zahir Shah Sherazi, "TTP Chief Mullah Fazalullah ousts Commander Omar Khorasani", *Dawn, Islamabad*, September 7, 2014, available at: <http://www.dawn.com/news/1130446>

<sup>17</sup> Tahir Khan, "Twin suicide attack in Islamabad district court leave 11 dead, 25 injured", *The Express Tribune*, March 3, 2014

<sup>18</sup> "Pakistani Taliban Split Widens", *Newsweek Pakistan*, September 5, 2014, available at: <http://newsweekpakistan.com/pakistani-taliban-split-widens/>

<sup>19</sup> Tahir Ali, "Tension among TTP factions spirals", *The Nation, Islamabad*, September 5, 2014, available at: <http://nation.com.pk/national/05-Sep-2014/tension-among-ttp-factions-spirals>

<sup>20</sup> "Pakistan Taliban criticize awarding of Nobel Peace Prize to Malala", *The Indian Express*, October 11, 2014, available at: <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/asia/pakistan-taliban-criticise-awarding-of-nobel-peace-prize-to-malala/>

anniversary of 9/11 attacks and pledged to continue jihad against the US<sup>21</sup>. The Khursani group also condemned democracy and all parties inclined towards establishing strong democratic institutions in Pakistan.

Omar Khalid led Jamaat ul Ahrar claimed responsibility of November 2 Wagah Border suicide attack in Lahore. More than 60 people lost their lives and 110 received injuries when a suicide bomber blew himself while the people were returning after watching parade and flag lowering ceremony near the Pakistan-Indian border at Wagah checkpoint near Lahore. Jamaat ul Ahrar spokesperson Ehsanullah Ehsan proudly claimed the responsibility and said,

*"We will continue such attacks in the future. Some other groups have claimed responsibility of this attack, but these claims are baseless. We will soon release the video of this attack, this attack is revenge for the killing of innocent people in North Waziristan,"<sup>22</sup>*

### Re-conciliations with Fazalullah

The terrorist attack on December 16, 2014 on Army Public School in Peshawar resulted in the deaths of 141 people<sup>23</sup>, most of them ninth grade school children. The terrorist attack was in reaction to Pakistani military's operation (Operation Zarb-e-Azb) against TTP in North Waziristan agency. The severity of operation allowed TTP Emir Fazalullah to reconcile its differences with other disgruntled leaders of TTP. Reconciliation with Khurasani was indeed paramount and Fazalullah initiated the process by first taking Khurassani back into the fold. In the first week of March, Ehsanullah Ihsan the spokesperson of Jamaat ul Ahrar issued a statement confirming the merging of TTP factions, he said,

*"We congratulate the Ummat-e-Muslima [the Muslim community] in common and especially the Mujahideen of Pakistan for the coalition of strong Jihadi groups, Tehreek-e-Taliban [Movement of the Taliban] Pakistan Jamaat ul Ahrar, Tehreek-e-Lashkar-e-Islam and Tehreek-e-Taliban on one name Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan against the Taghooti [satanic], Infidel, Democratic, unIslamic system and the Na-Pak Murtad [a Muslim who rejects Islam] Army,"<sup>24</sup>*

The restoration of ties with Fazalullah and another strong commander Mangal Bagh of Lashkar-e-Islam group shows the tactical acumen of Khurassani and his ability to make critical judgements amid desperate times. Despite having severe differences with both Mangal Bagh and Fazalullah he not only reconciled with them but also showed flexibility in accepting Fazalullah as the Emir of grand TTP alliance.

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<sup>21</sup> "TTP Jamaat-ul-Ahrar Celebrates 9/11 Anniversary, Pledges to Continue Jihad", *Jihadist News, SITE Monitoring Service*, September 11, 2014, available at: <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/ttp-jamat-ul-ahrar-celebrates-9-11-anniversary-pledges-to-continue-jihad.html>

<sup>22</sup> "TTP splinter groups claim Wagah attack; 60 dead", *Dawn, Lahore*, November 3, 2014, available at: <http://www.dawn.com/news/1142006>

<sup>23</sup> "132 children killed in Peshawar school attack", *The Express Tribune*, December 16, 2014, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/807564/gunmen-target-school-in-peshawar/>

<sup>24</sup> Bill Roggio, "Pakistani jihadist groups, Lashkar-i-Islam merge into the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan", *The Long War Journal*, March 12, 2015, available at: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/pakistani-jihadist-groups-lashkar-i-islam-merge-into-the-movement-of-the-taliban-in-pakistan.php>

## Operational Capabilities and Ideology

Under the leadership of Khalid the TTP Mohmand chapter emerged as one the toughest fighting forces and managed to thwart military operations in Mohmand agency. The Omar Khaild Khursani faction of TTP is known to have hard core Islamist beliefs. Khurasani has always opposed peace talks with government. The group staunchly believed in creating an Islamic Caliphate in Pakistan governed under Wahabi/Salafi Sharia laws<sup>25</sup>. Khurasani has repeatedly expressed his contempt for the Pakistani constitution and vowed to replace it with Sharia laws. While pledging allegiance to Taliban supreme commander Mullah Omar, Khurasani also declared Al-Qaeda's former Emir his hero<sup>26</sup>.

While discussing his ideological beliefs, Khalid describes that he initially believed that Pakistan would become part of the Islamic Caliphate movement that started from Afghanistan under the Taliban, but after the fall of Taliban regime he focused on implementation of Sharia laws in Pakistan and eventually turning Pakistan into an Islamic Caliphate. After the commencement of Pakistan Army operations in tribal areas now he believes that an Islamic State could only be created in Pakistan after the defeat of Pakistan Army and security forces which could be done by providing Pakistani jihadis a staging area for jihad<sup>27</sup>.

During his rise to power in Mohmand Agency, Khurasani faced formidable enemies like Shah Khalid group. He successfully defeated Shah Khalid's forces after a series of fierce battles in 2008. Afterwards Khursani became the undisputed warlord of Mohmand Agency<sup>28</sup>.

Khurasani also managed to hold back successive military operations launched specifically against his group in 2010. Operation Brekhna (Thunder) was launched by Pakistani Army and Frontier Corp to flush out Khorasni's group in Mohmand<sup>29</sup>. Khurasani aided by his right hand Qari Shakeel successfully held back the military onslaught and sustained military firepower. Avoiding direct confrontation he took refuge in Afghanistan, salvaging his forces from destruction. Khursani's forces regained all control after the withdrawal of military from tactical strongholds. In one brutal assault the Khurasani led militants kidnapped (in 2010) and beheaded 23 personnel of Frontier Corps in 2014<sup>30</sup>.

Khursani was also up front among the jihadi circles of Pakistan to denounce the Lal Masjid operation (Red Mosque military operation in 2007, aka Operation Silence by Special Forces of Pakistan Army after a long siege) and was the first jihadi commander who vowed to take revenge<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Amir Rana, "Ideological Purification: Understanding the TTP Split", *Dawn, Karachi*, September 2, 2014, available at: <http://www.dawn.com/news/1129416>

<sup>26</sup> Daud Khattak, "Splits in the Pakistani Taliban", *Foreign Policy: the South Asia Channel*, October 3, 2014, available at: [http://southasia.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/10/03/splits\\_in\\_the\\_pakistani\\_taliban](http://southasia.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/10/03/splits_in_the_pakistani_taliban)

<sup>27</sup> Op Cit Ihya-e-Khilafat, p.6-11

<sup>28</sup> Bill Roggio, "The Pakistani Taliban's Top Leaders", *The Long War Journal*, May 17, 2010, available at: [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/05/the\\_pakistani\\_taliba\\_1.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/05/the_pakistani_taliba_1.php)

<sup>29</sup> Ismail Khan, "Govt blundering into a blind alley?", *Dawn, Islamabad*, February 18, 2014, available at: [http://epaper.dawn.com/DetailImage.php?StoryImage=18\\_02\\_2014\\_001\\_004](http://epaper.dawn.com/DetailImage.php?StoryImage=18_02_2014_001_004)

<sup>30</sup> "Pakistani Taliban claim beheading 23 soldiers", *IBN Live*, February 17, 2014, available at: <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/pakistani-taliban-claims-beheading-23-soldiers/452565-2.html>

<sup>31</sup> "Another Lal Masjid surfaces", *Daily Times*, Islamabad, July 30, 2007, available at: <http://archives.dailytimes.com.pk/main/30-Jul-2007/another-lal-masjid-surfaces>

## In Karachi

The Khurasani faction has spread tentacles in settled districts as far as in Karachi. The city of Karachi is home to a plethora of Pashtun internally displaced people and refugees from tribal districts, settled in the peripheries of Karachi. The most recent terrorist attack launched by Khurasani affiliated militants in Karachi was the assassination of Superintendent of Police Mohammad Aslam Khan (aka Chaudhry Aslam) in a suicide bombing on his vehicle on Lyari Express Way flyover in January 2014<sup>32</sup>. Several earlier attempts on the life of Khan by other Taliban factions had gone in vain, including one that completely destroyed his house and resulted in the death of six of Khan's police gunmen present at duty outside his house in Defense Housing Society Phase VIII. Khan was known for his anti-TTP stance and conducted scores of operations against TTP strongholds in peripheral areas of Karachi in the last five years. At least 40 TTP leaders and rank and file were killed in Khan-led operations in Karachi<sup>33</sup>. Karachi suburbs such as Manghopir, Kati Pahari, Malir, and Kemari, because of their mushroom growth have become home to both TTP and Jamaat-ul Ahrar linked groups.

It appears that Khurasani, now heading his own faction of TTP, may attempt to cajole more TTP factions based in Karachi's Pashtun dominated suburban localities to join his ranks. The cosmopolitan city offers multiple ways for extorting money from traders and businessmen than the whole of tribal areas and other parts of Pakistan.

## In Islamabad

Apart from port city Karachi the Khurasani network has managed to form sleeper cells in Islamabad and Rawalpindi's Pashtun populated slums. The mushroom growth of Islamabad's slums is exponential amid the military operations against Taliban outfits in tribal areas and Khyber-Pakhtun-Khawa province. Hundreds of thousands of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) have taken refuge, in and around Islamabad since 2009. The Khan-koh suburb of Islamabad is considered to be one of the bases of TTP sleeper cells. The TTP-linked groups now based in these localities of Karachi, Islamabad and Rawalpindi have consistently been found involved in criminal activities such as kidnappings for ransom and other crimes amounting to extortion.

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<sup>32</sup> Tahir Khan, "Chaudhry Aslam's assassination: TTP see nomination of its leaders as a 'reward'", *The Express Tribune*, January 13, 2014, available at: <http://tribune.com.pk/story/658373/chaudhry-aslams-assassination-ttp-see-nomination-of-its-leaders-as-a-reward/>

<sup>33</sup> Personal Interview with Senior Superintendent of Police, in charge of Karachi CID (name held for security reasons)

## Conclusion

The surfacing of Jamaat ul Ahrar from the TTP's wings showcases the change of course by Pakistani Islamist militants. Al-Qaeda which used to define the course of action for Pakistani groups appears to lose some ground to ISIS. Al-Qaeda ideologues now have to compete with their own splinter (Al-Qaeda in Iraq, now called ISIS) for getting the confidence of Islamist groups in Pakistan.

The May 13 terrorist attack on a bus carrying members of Ismaili Shia community was initially claimed by Jundullah but as investigations progressed it turned out to be the work of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). The Karachi-based Islamist terrorist cell involved in perpetrating the attack was affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent (AQIS). Blaming the attack on Jundullah/ISIS was indeed a tactical move by AQIS. The AQIS-linked cell tried to divert the attention of investigators by dropping Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) Khurasan Chapter's pamphlets on the spot. Falling into the trap the ISIS-affiliated Pakistani terrorist group Jundullah was quick enough to claim the responsibility<sup>34</sup>. Later it turned out to be an act of deception and the arrested individuals have long been associated with Al-Qaeda and its recently established local chapter the AQIS. The incident shows the beginning of a turf war between Al-Qaeda and ISIS. It appears that ISIS is trying hard to find ground in the Pakistani jihadi landscape<sup>35</sup>. The event appears to mark the beginning of turf war between Al-Qaeda and ISIS in Pakistan. For instance, after the establishment of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent the Jamaat ul Ahrar spokesperson has already welcomed the creation of Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent by Ayman al-Zawahiri<sup>36</sup> indicating a strong possibility that Al-Qaeda may franchise Khurasani with his local franchise (Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent) rather than Fazalullah who might have joined ISIS and pledge allegiance to Caliph of Islamic State Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi if TTP factions did not reconcile.

It seems that Al-Qaeda is already on the course to accept the challenge surfacing of ISIS in Pakistan. The establishment of new Al-Qaeda branch, the Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent is one step to reassert the Al-Qaeda's desire to dominate the Pakistani jihadi scene. Jamaat ul Ahrar, composed of seasoned jihadis like Omar Khalid Khurasani would definitely embolden Al-Qaeda in Pakistan.

In fact it is high time for Pakistani counter terrorism policy makers not to allow any ISIS-AQIS competition in Pakistan. The ISIS on its part should not be allowed to flex its muscles in and consolidate its position in the jihadi landscape of Pakistan. The growth of ISIS in Pakistan has disturbed already entrenched Al-Qaeda and it appears to feel threatened and may attempt to compete with ISIS as far as ferocity and ruthlessness of terrorist tactics are concerned. A concerted counter terrorism strategy, with all law enforcement and security apparatus aboard is required. The AQIS-ISIS competition could cause serious repercussions for Pakistan and pose impeccable challenges for already burdened law enforcement and security agencies. Most importantly myths and preconceived notions about terrorists ought to be smashed, only then the complex nature of terrorism could be studied objectively and terrorism as a phenomenon analysed in an empirical manner.

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<sup>34</sup> Author's telephonic interview with Azaz Syed, crime reporter of GEO Television Network in Islamabad

<sup>35</sup> Author's interview with Muhammad Amir Rana, Director Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS)

<sup>36</sup> "Pakistani Taliban faction welcomes new Al-Qaeda branch", *Al-Arabiya-English*, Islamabad, September 5, 2014, available at: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/2014/09/05/Pakistani-Taliban-faction-welcomes-new-al-Qaeda-branch.html>

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