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Al-Qaeda commander threatens US with Pakistani Nukes



Al-Qaeda is believed to have close links to Pakistan's Taliban and other anti-government groups [AFP]

Al-Qaeda's third-in-command has told Al Jazeera that the group would use Pakistan's nuclear weapons against the US if it gained access to them.

Pakistan has been battling the Taliban and its al-Qaeda allies in the Swat valley and tribal areas in the northwest since April when fighters took hold of a region just 100km away from the capital, Islamabad.

"By God's will, the Americans will not seize the Muslims' nuclear weapons and we pray that the Muslims will have these weapons and they will be used against the Americans," Mustafa Abul-Yazeed, al-Qaeda's leader in Afghanistan, said in an exclusive interview that aired on Sunday.

He said al-Qaeda assists the mujahidin fighters in Afghanistan, maintains strong relations with the leaders of Taliban and expects that Pakistan's government will be defeated in the Swat conflict.

Asked about the whereabouts of al-Qaeda's two main leaders, Abul-Yazeed said: "Praise God, Sheikh Osama (bin Laden) and Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri are safe from the reach of the enemies, but I don't know where they are and I can't say where they are, but they are aware of everything and all the fighting in the field."

Taliban 'welcomed'

Before arriving in Afghanistan, Abul-Yazeed was al-Qaeda's chief financial officer and reportedly also provided funds for the September 11, 2001, attacks in the US.

In the early 1980s, he served time in jail along with al-Zawahiri for his involvement in the assassination of Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president.

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In his interview, Abul-Yazeed praised the conditions in Pakistan, saying that the

"Taliban and all the tribal areas welcomed and always defended us when we left Afghanistan.

"They were attacked by the Pakistani army when they protected us. We always defend each other.

"We believe in the same principles about jihad, faith and loyalty. After that, when the conditions improved and we were allowed to go to Afghanistan, we entered and some of us stayed in the tribes' areas. They are still protected there."

Commenting on Abul-Yazeed's remarks, Michael Griffin, an al-Qaeda expert, told Al-Jazeera that they reveal a "curious mix of bravado and defiance" but also a "certain sense of weakness about al-Qaeda".

"If they had safe havens in Swat, they have pretty much vanished along with the entire three million population of Swat as a result of recent government military activities up there," Griffin said.

"I don't think this is as powerful an organisation as it was last year."

'Not weakened'

For his part, Abul-Yazeed insisted that al-Qaeda had not been weakened, and instead suggested that its presence was spreading widely, with new fronts opening up across the region.

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"Through these fronts, we replaced the big operation implemented against our enemies with small ones as we achieved our great goals from launching massive operations," he said.

"We will never abandon the big operations...We already planned for some but they were postponed due to certain circumstances."

While it is known that the Taliban and al-Qaeda have collaborated in Pakistan on significant and destructive attacks, Griffin said that to a large extent the Taliban in Afghanistan is operating independently of al-Qaeda.

"Except for certain very prestigious operations like attacks on the Serena hotel or attempts to assassinate [Afghan President] Hamid Karzai, I think the attacks are organised by local Taliban commanders working in loose co-operation with al-Qaeda," Griffin said.

"When the military in Pakistan was making peace agreements with the Taliban, they were effectively making peace agreements with al-Qaeda," he said.

"Now that they are on the backfoot, you will see al-Qaeda pulling themselves out of Waziristan and moving its men to Somalia and Yemen."

'Taliban's defence'

In other remarks, Abul-Yazeed criticised Pakistan for adopting English laws to rule a Muslim country instead of using the Islamic sharia law.

He also blamed the Pakistani army for attacking Taliban fighters in the Waziristan region and other tribal areas.

"[The fighters] were defending themselves only. They didn't start fighting the Pakistani army. We didn't have the intentions to attack the Pakistani army or the government. We did so when they repeatedly attacked us and committed different crimes against the Pakistani people and the mujahidin," he said.

As for Abul-Yazeed's comments about gaining control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and using them against the US, Griffin said that the threat was once pressing, especially when al-Qaeda launched an effective suicide attack on Wah, west of Islamabad - one of the main nuclear assembly storage areas.

But the threat has since become diffused.

"That attack indicated the vulnerability of the areas within Pakistan which are called the settled areas as opposed to the tribal areas," Griffin said.

"But Pakistan is looking much, much less like a failed state than it did last year."