

HAS TNR'S PREDICTION COME TRUE?

## July Surprised

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July 29, Faisal Saleh Hayyat, Pakistan's interior minister, announced the arrest of a high-ranking Al Qaeda figure on local television. After a tense standoff in Gujrat, a city some 100 miles southeast of Islamabad, Pakistani security forces had captured the Tanzanian jihadist Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani, the FBI's twenty-second "Most Wanted" terrorist and a suspected conspirator in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. A proud Hayyat dubbed the arrest "another crowning success of Pakistan's security apparatus in the fight against terrorism." But it is doubtful Hayyat was really addressing his fellow Pakistanis: He made the announcement at midnight. More likely, his intended audience was half a world away—in the United States, where, in the middle of the afternoon, John Kerry was preparing to deliver his nomination speech to the Democratic National Convention.

While media coverage of the capture didn't exactly overshadow Kerry—Ghailani isn't Osama bin Laden—the announcement's timing seemed suspicious. Ghailani wasn't apprehended on July 29 at all, but rather four days earlier. Last month, *The New Republic* reported that the Bush administration was pressuring the Pakistanis to deliver a "high-value target" (HVT) in time for the November elections ("July Surprise?" July 19). According to an official with Pakistan's powerful Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), a White House aide told ISI chief Ehsan ul-Haq during a spring visit to Washington that "it would be best if the arrest or killing of [any] HVT were announced on twenty-six, twenty-seven, or twenty-eight July," during the convention. When asked this week if the announcement of Ghailani's capture on July 29 confirmed TNR's reporting, National Security Council spokesman Sean McCormack told the *Los Angeles Times*, "There is no truth to that statement."

But some American and Pakistani intelligence and counterterrorism officials do question the timing of the announcement. After his arrest, Ghailani's Pakistani captors, with assistance from FBI officials, set to work getting him to talk. While they had little initial success, a source privy to the interrogations says, "It might have taken awhile, but he would ultimately have broken down," at which point Ghailani might well have shared information, such as the names of Qaeda associates, that the Pakistanis could have acted on. But, before that could happen, according to an ISI officer, FBI officials, who had initially insisted on keeping the arrest secret, told officials in Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's government that Islamabad should announce Ghailani's capture. An ISI official explains, "When it comes to matters especially pertaining to Al Qaeda, it is always the U.S. administration that takes most of the decisions, while the Pakistani government simply plays the role of a front man." This official and another ISI official believe that the driving factor behind the announcement was U.S. politics. "What else could explain it?" the second official says.

Though there is no policy governing how long to keep such arrests secret, standard intelligence practices dictate that the capture should not have been made public until investigators had finished with Ghailani (and the laptop and computer disks he had been captured with). Indeed, Ghailani may still talk, but some current and former American officials fear that, by broadcasting his name around the world, the Pakistanis have reduced the value of the intelligence that interrogators can extract from him. "Now, anything that he was involved in is being shredded, burned, and thrown in a river," a senior counterterrorism official told the *Los Angeles Times*. "We have to assume anyone affiliated with this guy is on the run . . . when, usually, we can get great stuff as long as we can keep it quiet." Adds former CIA operative Robert Baer: "It makes no sense to make

the announcement then. Presumably, everything [Al Qaeda] does is compartmented. By announcing to everybody in the world that we have this guy, and he is talking, you have to assume that you shoot tactics. To keep these guys off-balance, a lot of this stuff should be kept in secret. You get no benefit from announcing an arrest like this. You always want to get these guys when they are on vacation, when they are not expecting you.”

In fact, Al Qaeda has a history of adapting to intelligence penetrations. In 1998, a leak to *The Washington Times* detailing “an intelligence bonanza” from intercepted cell phone calls made by bin Laden and his cohorts resulted in the abrupt abandonment of the phones—and the end of the bonanza. Some CIA counterterrorism officials believe the premature announcements of the arrests of important Qaeda terrorists like Abu Zubaydah and Tawfiq bin Attash limited the value of the information they possessed about their comrades, who are believed to discard cell phones and e-mail addresses every two or three days. Daniel Benjamin, a counterterrorism official in the Clinton administration, says he doesn’t know all the facts behind Ghailani’s arrest, but he observes, “If you have that much stuff on a guy, I would think you would want to keep it quiet for awhile to follow up all the leads.”

And there could well be leads to follow up, just as there were after the apprehension of Qaeda associates Musaad Aruchi in Karachi on June 12 and Muhammed Naeem Noor Khan in Lahore on July 13. Both suspected terrorists were captured along with laptops, computer disks, and maps indicating surveillance of U.S. installations in preparation for an attack, and their information led investigators to Ghailani—and contributed to the announcement of this week’s Code Orange alert. “There is not a single significant Al Qaeda arrest that didn’t yield us more,” a senior Pakistani intelligence official told *The Washington Post*. But the arrests of Aruchi and Khan were kept secret for weeks—until reporters started investigating the Ghailani capture. “I’m definitely cynical enough to believe the timing [of these announcements] is always political,” says a recently retired intelligence official. “I think the timing of a success announcement or a failure announcement is always optimized as much as whoever controls it can optimize it.” But American and Pakistani security officials remain skeptical as to what the Ghailani announcement really optimized—the war on terrorism or George W. Bush’s reelection campaign.