

A Profile of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

By Hassan Abbas

THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTH, military strategy and leadership quality of the Taliban in Pakistan's tribal territories has qualitatively improved during the last few years. At the time of the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan in late 2001, allies and sympathizers of the Taliban in Pakistan were not identified as "Taliban" themselves. That reality is now a distant memory. Today, Pakistan's indigenous Taliban are an effective fighting force and are engaging the Pakistani military on one side and NATO forces on the other.

The transition from being Taliban supporters and sympathizers to becoming a mainstream Taliban force in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) initiated when many small militant groups operating independently in the area started networking with one another. This sequence of developments occurred while Pakistani forces were spending the majority of their resources finding "foreigners" in the area linked to al-Qa`ida (roughly in the 2002-04 period). Soon, many other local extremist groups, which were banned in Pakistan, started joining the Taliban ranks in FATA—some as followers while others as partners. During this process, the Pakistani Taliban never really merged into the organizational structure of the Afghan Taliban under Mullah Omar; instead, they developed a distinct identity. From their perspective, they intelligently created a space for themselves in Pakistan by engaging in military attacks while at other times cutting deals with the Pakistani government to establish their autonomy in the area.¹ By default, they were accepted as a legitimate voice in at least two FATA agencies—South Waziristan and North Waziristan.

During this process, the Pakistani Taliban effectively established themselves as an alternative leadership to the traditional tribal elders. By the time the Pakistani government realized

the changing dynamics and tried to resurrect the tribal jirga institution, it was too late. The Taliban had killed approximately 200 of the tribal elders under charges of being Pakistani and American spies.

These developments explain the genesis of a new formation: Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The TTP refers to the Taliban "movement" in Pakistan that coalesced in December 2007 under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud—a wanted militant leader from South Waziristan. This analysis discusses the origin, nature, capabilities and potential of this organization.

Formation of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

The name "Tehrik-i-Taliban" had been used prior to the latest December 14 announcement. An organization with a similar name emerged in FATA's Orakzai Agency in 1998.² Some reports also mention a similar organization by the name of Tehrik-i-Tulaba (Movement of Students) also operating in Orakzai Agency that even established an active Shari`a court.³ The name and idea, therefore, is not original.

More recently, on October 23, a credible newspaper in Pakistan disclosed that five militant groups joined hands to set up an organization named Tehrik-i-Taliban in Mohmand Agency with a goal "to flush out gangs carrying out criminal activities in the name of Taliban." Its spokesman, who was identified under the Arab name Abu Nauman Askari, even mentioned the formation of a 16-member *shura* (consultative committee) to coordinate the activities of the groups.⁴ The statement, however, sounded like an initiative that benefited from government involvement since Islamabad has been attempting to create rifts between the different Taliban and militant factions. The rise of Maulvi Nazir in 2007, for instance, was such an operation as he had received government support in challenging Uzbek militants operating in South Waziristan.⁵ Furthermore, the news

was not carried by any other major newspaper in the country, indicating that no general press release was issued by the supposed new formation. In this context, it is possible that it was a planted story by Pakistan's intelligence services to gather support for the group. Such leaks are not uncommon. Nothing has been heard about this organization since.

Less than two months after this announcement, another group claiming to be Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan announced its formation. The December 14, 2007 announcement was viewed suspiciously in terms of authenticity, since it followed after the October 23 announcement. It soon became clear, however, that the December 14 announcement was unique and alarming. It showed that the authentic Taliban were quick to establish their ownership over the title "Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan."

Structure, Activities and Goals of the TTP

A *shura* of 40 senior Taliban leaders established the TTP as an umbrella organization. Militant commander Baitullah Mehsud was appointed as its *amir*, Maulana Hafiz Gul Bahadur of North Waziristan as senior *naib amir* (deputy) and Maulana Faqir Muhammad of Bajaur Agency as the third in command.⁶ The *shura* not only has representation from all of FATA's seven tribal agencies, but also from the settled North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) districts of Swat, Bannu, Tank, Lakki Marwat, Dera Ismail Khan, Kohistan, Buner and Malakand. This reach demonstrates the TTP's ambitions. Since its establishment, the TTP through its various *demarches* have announced the following objectives and principles:

1. Enforce Shari`a, unite against NATO forces in Afghanistan and perform "defensive jihad against the Pakistan army."⁷
2. React strongly if military operations are not stopped in Swat District and North Waziristan Agency.

2 Hassan Abbas, "The Black-Turbaned Brigade: The Rise of TNSM in Pakistan," *Terrorism Monitor* 4:23 (2006).

3 *The Herald* [Karachi], February 1999.

4 "Militants Form New Group," *Dawn*, October 23, 2007.

5 For details, see Hassan Abbas, "South Waziristan's Maulvi Nazir: The New Face of the Taliban," *Terrorism*

Monitor 5:9 (2007).

6 Mushtaq Yusufzai, "Militants Seek End to Military Operations," *The News*, December 16, 2007.

7 "Second Editorial: Tribal Areas Under Centralized Control," *Daily Times*, December 16, 2007.

1 They began cutting deals with the government in 2004.

3. Demand the abolishment of all military checkpoints in the FATA area.
4. Demand the release of Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) Imam Abdul Aziz.
5. Refuse future peace deals with the government of Pakistan.

Initially, the TTP gave a 10 day deadline for the government to stop military action in FATA and Swat District, but then extended the deadline in lieu of the country's mourning of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's death on December 27, 2007.⁸ On January 4, 2008, however, TTP spokesman Ghazi Ahmed called journalists to inform them that a one week extension of the ultimatum would begin on January 5 and threatened to attack the city of Peshawar if their demands were not met.⁹ The TTP was also quick to deny their involvement in killing Bhutto after the government of Pakistan claimed that her assassination was conducted by associates of Baitullah Mehsud and even produced a transcript of Mehsud's telephone conversation proving his involvement.¹⁰

Mehsud's spokesman responded by maintaining that the transcript was "a drama," and that Bhutto's death was a "tragedy" that had left Mehsud "shocked."¹¹ A purported spokesman for Mehsud, Maulvi Omar, later told Reuters: "Tribal people have their own customs. We don't strike women."¹² This shows that the organization has a media cell, a public relations policy and is quite serious about its plans. The Pakistani government has been slow to respond to these developments as the TTP has not yet been officially banned, and the government maintains that "a decision to this effect will come only after a thorough examination of all the aspects concerned."¹³

8 Alamgir Bhattani, "Taliban Give Two Days for Swat Pullout," *Dawn*, January 3, 2008.

9 "Tehrik-i-Taliban Threatens Attacks in Settled Areas," *The News*, January 5, 2008; "Taliban Set 7-day Deadline," *The Nation* [Lahore], January 5, 2008.

10 "Transcript of Alleged al-Qaida Intercept," ABC News, December 28, 2007.

11 "Mehsud Denies Killing Bhutto: Al-Qaida," NDTV, December 29, 2007.

12 Laura King, "Taliban Blamed for Attack on Bhutto," *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 2007.

13 Azaz Syed, "Taliban Outfit Faces Ban," *Daily Times*,

Although the TTP is young as an organization, there is no dearth of operational capabilities at its disposal. Baitullah Mehsud already is an established leader—with the command of some 5,000 fighters—and has been involved in militant activities for the last few years in FATA and the adjacent areas. Many other militant groups seem anxious to join in. On December 23, 2007, for instance, five soldiers and six civilians were killed in the Mingora area of the Swat Valley when a suicide bomber targeted an army convoy. Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) quickly claimed responsibility for the

“The TTP, however, is bound to refocus on Afghanistan if and when its position strengthens in FATA and the NWFP.”

attack on behalf of the TTP.¹⁴ TNSM, another banned terrorist outfit, is led by Maulana Fazlullah and had re-emerged in 2006. The group made headlines for taking control of large areas in the Swat Valley of the NWFP. The army, after a large operation in late 2007, recaptured the district, but TNSM militants (numbering in the hundreds) are still operating in parts of the district. The TTP's demand for halting government military action in Swat appealed to TNSM members and will predictably lead to more collaboration between the two groups in terms of manpower, logistics and intelligence. TNSM leader Fazlullah is known for the mobile FM radio stations that he managed until recently, on which he would broadcast his radical ideology. A TTP radio broadcast in the future would be one potential sign of more cooperation between the two terrorist groups.

The TTP's denial about its involvement in Bhutto's murder has little face value, but it is too early to reach any conclusion since the Pervez Musharraf government may be trying to shift the blame and divert attention from its own failure to provide adequate security for

December 21, 2007.

14 Claude Salhani, "A Grim Year 2007 for Pakistan," *Middle East Times*, December 28, 2007.

Bhutto. The TTP's involvement in the killings of nine tribesmen associated with pro-government leader Maulvi Nazir on January 7 in South Waziristan, however, is near certain.¹⁵ The Pakistani government has also circulated a list to law enforcement agencies of about a dozen important Shi'a political leaders who, according to its intelligence services, are on Baitullah Mehsud's hit list.¹⁶

Brief Profiles of TTP's Senior Leaders

Baitullah Mehsud—The 34-year-old warrior belongs to South Waziristan Agency and hails from the Mehsud tribe. He did not attend schooling or religious madrasa. He shuns media and has refused to be photographed, indicating that he stands by the fanatic Talibanized version of Islam. His worldview is evident from his statement that "only jihad can bring peace to the world."¹⁷ He came to prominence in February 2005 when he signed a deal with the Pakistani government that it termed as his surrender, although he interpreted it as a peace deal in the interests of the tribal regions as well as Pakistan.¹⁸ As part of the deal, he had pledged not to provide any assistance to al-Qa`ida and other militants and not to launch operations against government forces. The deal was short lived, and since 2006 he has virtually established an independent zone in parts of South Waziristan Agency, which is widely believed to be a sanctuary for al-Qa`ida and the Taliban. In private discussions, Pakistani officials also blame the United States for direct military operations in FATA, leading to the collapse of some deals. Mehsud commands a force of around 5,000 militants and has moved aggressively against Pakistan's army in recent months, especially when he captured around 250 army soldiers in August 2007.¹⁹ The soldiers were returned only when the government released 25 militants associated with

15 "Nine Aides of Maulvi Nazir Killed," *Daily Times*, January 8, 2008.

16 Personal interview, Pakistani government official, January 5, 2008.

17 Syed Shoaib Hasan, "Profile: Baitullah Mehsud," BBC, December 28, 2007.

18 Shamim Shahid, "Baitullah, Supporters, Lay Down Arms," *The Nation*, February 8, 2005.

19 Amir Mir, "The Most Wanted Pakistani Talib," *Pakistan Post*, December 10, 2007.

Mehsud.²⁰

Maulana Hafiz Gul Bahadur—Belonging to North Waziristan Agency, he has been a member of the local Taliban *shura* since 2005. He was also a member of the three-man signatory team, representing North Waziristan tribes, that signed the well-known peace deal between the Pakistani government and North Waziristan in September 2006.²¹ The deal collapsed in July 2007. Currently, some negotiations are being held again between the government and the agency, and Bahadur is involved in these discussions. Bahadur in fact recently chaired the meeting of militants that extended an ongoing cease-fire until January 20, 2008.²² It is noteworthy that on one hand he is part of the TTP leadership—which is openly challenging the government—while on the other hand is negotiating with the government on behalf of his home agency. It is possible that the government is trying to create a wedge between the top leaders of the TTP—a smart move if this is indeed the motivation.

Maulana Faqir Muhammad—The relatively well-profiled 39-year-old Faqir Muhammad belongs to Mohmand tribe and is known as a facilitator for al-Qa`ida.²³ He is a resident of Bajaur Agency, but was educated in the Salafist tradition in various madrasas of the NWFP. This brought him closer to the Arabs operating in the area, which also benefited him financially. This perhaps allows him to afford the personal security team that he is known to have. He came into prominence in 2005 when government forces raided his house in search of some “high-value” al-Qa`ida operatives. He was a target of a U.S. missile attack in 2006, but he escaped unhurt. He also remained close to TNSM’s founder Maulana Sufi Muhammad, who is currently in jail.

Conclusion

Of the 56 suicide bombings in Pakistan in 2007, 36 were against military related targets, including two against the ISI; two against the army headquarters in Rawalpindi; one aimed at the air force in Sargodha; and one directed at the facility of the Special Services Group (SSG) in Tarbela. For many of these attacks, the government blamed Baitullah Mehsud and his associates. This reveals the TTP’s potential now that it has additional resources and geographic reach. This new organization in fact is expected to increase the capacity of militant forces in the area and exacerbate the political instability that has gripped Pakistan in recent months. This internal engagement also perhaps largely accounts for the 40 percent decline in insurgent attacks on NATO forces in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas.²⁴ The TTP, however, is bound to refocus on Afghanistan if and when its position strengthens in FATA and the NWFP.

There are signs that the government is now targeting the TTP leadership, but it lacks the human intelligence required on the ground. Musharraf’s waning support within the armed forces also complicates the country’s “war on terrorism” strategy. There are many indications that some former intelligence agents and serving junior level officials of the army apparently are in league with the militants. Borrowing the words of leading Pakistani scholar Pervez Hoodbhoy, “a part of the establishment is clearly at war with another part.” In this troubling scenario, dismantling the TTP and bringing its leadership to justice is critical for Pakistan’s internal security as well as for tackling the Taliban insurgency in southern Afghanistan.

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20 Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau, “Al Qaeda’s Newest Triggerman,” *Newsweek*, January 14, 2007.

21 Rahimullah Yusufzai, “Peace Accord with Militants,” *The News*, September 14, 2006.

22 “Five Killed in S Waziristan Clashes,” *The News*, January 9, 2008.

23 Sohail Abdul Nasir, “Al-Zawahiri’s Pakistani Ally: Profile of Maulana Faqir Mohammed,” *Terrorism Monitor* 4:3 (2006).

24 Jason Straziuso, “US: Afghan Border Attacks Drop 40 pct.,” *Guardian*, December 16, 2007.