



"Competing Voices Within the Taliban Leadership in Pakistan"

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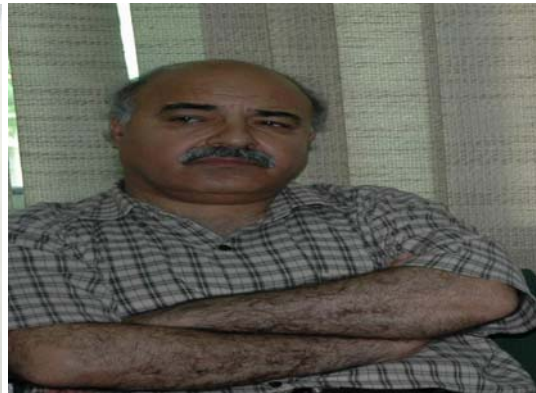
[NEFA Foundation Senior Investigator Claudio Franco conducts in-depth research for as much as half the year in the regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan—where he has been a regular visitor since approximately 1999. In September 2007, NBC Nightly News featured video Franco filmed when he observed an underground Taliban training camp operating north of the Afghan capital Kabul.]

Following the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) official acknowledgment of Baitullah Mehsud's death on August 25, 2009 and the consequent disarray among the TTP rank and file, the NEFA Foundation gathered a critically important statement by Mufti Kifayatullah,¹ spokesman for the Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam-Fazlur (JUI-F) in the NWFP, who is regarded by many as a pivotal powerbroker where the Pakistani Taliban movement is concerned.

In addition, the NEFA Foundation features an exclusive interview with Said Alam Mehsud,² a vocal member of the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami, a Pashtun nationalist party, and an acute observer of all matters Pashtun. Interestingly, in this exclusive audio interview, Mehsud specifically mentions Kifayat's role in liaising with the insurgents and, possibly, of pressuring them.



Mufti Kifayatullah



Said Alam Mehsud

¹ The audio of that interview is available at <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/MuftiKifayatullah.wav>, while the transcript is available at http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefa_kifayatullah0909.pdf.

² The audio of that interview is available at <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/SaidAlamMehsud.wav>.

Several analysts maintain that JUI-F has often played a critically important role in providing advice to, and influencing, the Taliban movement in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, and Mufti Kifayatullah's statement on record seems to reinforce this impression. In addition, with three JUI-F ministers in Islamabad, the party led by Fazlur Rehman is an integral part of the coalition backing Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani, and is the only party in power today that was also in power during General Musharraf's tenure. The proximity to the Taliban of a party which has a stake in the government of a key Washington ally could be seen as either an opportunity or a liability for the U.S.-led Coalition in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, we should remember that in today's context, one less insurgent active in Pakistan means one more deployed against NATO in Afghanistan,

The JUI-F spokesman provides a detailed narration of the tussle for the TTP leadership that followed Baitullah Mehsud's death. Mufti Kifayatullah's words provide an important element to gauge the influence of this mainstream religious party on the Pakistani Taliban movement and the apparently benevolent attitude nurtured by the former towards the latter.

Furthermore, Mufti Kifayatullah's statement acknowledges the growing importance of Waliur Rehman within the TTP movement and the JUI-F NWFP party leader appears to express support for Rehman's leadership bid. Moreover, Kifayatullah rejects the version of events provided by acting interior minister Malik Rehman, who maintained that Hakimullah and Waliur Rehman had been the protagonists of a fratricidal shoot out that had killed both in the hours following Baitullah's death. Kifayatullah suggests that the TTP might eventually have opted for dividing Baitullah's power between Hakimullah and Waliur Rehman, with Hakimullah in charge overall and Waliur Rehman in control of the TTP assets in South Waziristan. Nonetheless, Mufti Kifayatullah makes clear the TTP had initially chosen Waliur Rehman - as he certainly constituted the natural choice for the Mehsud tribesmen. After weeks of behind the scenes negotiations, however, the TTP had opted for a power-sharing solution in recognition of the will of other important non-Mehsud powerbrokers, such as Faquir Mohammed and Omar Khalid, for example.

Interestingly, Kifayatullah suggests that NATO killed Baitullah because the latter was close to striking a deal with the government, a deal based on the suspension of TTP activities on Pakistani soil. Such a deal would have aligned Baitullah's Mehsuds to the position of the key Wazir Taliban commanders, Hafez Gul Bahadur and Maulvi Nazir Ahmed, who control North Waziristan and the Wana area of South Waziristan, respectively. The Wazir bloc, led by Nazir and Bahadur, appears to be exclusively focused on operations in Afghanistan, while they continue to acknowledge a de facto truce with the Pakistani Government. It must be noted that the Pakistani Army would need to transit through either Nazir's or Bahadur's territory in order to confront Baitullah's Mujahideen-e-South Waziristan (TTP) led by Waliur Rehman. Kifayatullah's assertion regarding NATO's desire to kill Baitullah because of a possible deal with the Pakistani government rests on the following assumption: from the point of view of the U.S.-led Coalition, a TTP exclusively focused on operations in Afghanistan would be a disaster, as it was Baitullah's aggressive attitude towards Islamabad which guaranteed the latter's engagement against Taliban-like Islamists militants active on Pakistani territory.

Without Baitullah's anti-government stance, the Mehsuds would become, as in the case of the Wazir bloc, a proxy army based in Pakistan, but active only in Pakistan, thus diminishing Islamabad's anti-terrorist activities. Hence, Kifayatullah says, NATO would have killed Baitullah to facilitate the ascendance of his heir apparent, Hakimullah Mehsud, a leader well known for his activities in Pakistan.

Judging on the basis of Kifayatullah's words, however, it seems clear that the JUI-F parliamentarian is throwing his weight behind Waliur Rehman, who may represent a continuity choice with Baitullah's rumored warming towards the government. And, accordingly, Waliur Rehman was reportedly associated with the JUI-F before joining the TTP. In other words, JUI-F would attempt to shore up the credentials of Waliur Rehman to counter Hakimullah's anti-Pakistani stance from within the movement. Such a deal between the Pakistani authorities and the TTP would inevitably include the JUI-F playing an essential role. On the other hand, Hakimullah might be less liked by the party, considering his alliance which was nurtured during his stint in the triangle Orakzai-Kurram-Khyber, with members of Pakistani sectarian groups (such as Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi for example). If Hakimullah represents a continuity choice in relation to Baitullah's historical opposition to the Pakistani government, Waliur Rehman may be more inclined than Hakimullah in terms of striking a non-aggression deal with Islamabad, a deal which would be by and large piloted by the JUI-F.

Interestingly, the opposition between the two originates in their relationship with Baitullah Mehsud. Extremely young and able in battle, Hakimullah's fate seems to be linked to that of his blood cousin, Qari Hussein Mehsud, long Baitullah's most important commander and today among his legitimate heirs. In early 2008, Hakimullah, who at the time was 29 or 30 and had grown militarily under Qari Hussein, was charged by Baitullah to deal with the Orakzai-Khyber-Kurram triangle and that appointment was critically important. If brought under TTP control, that triangle would have allowed the TTP to deploy their most prized asset - the opportunity for the tribal Taliban militias to provide support to each other when under attack, thus pre-empting the Army's ability to confront the problem one tribal agency at a time. Furthermore, the Orakzai-Khyber-Kurram triangle was strategically important because it included the Khyber Pass and the Pak-Afghan Highway, the main artery of communication for NATO convoys heading West.

There is one additional critically important factor to consider and that is the fact that the Darra Adam Khel Area, situated in Frontier Region Kohat and also under Hakimullah command, had become the main area of operations for those locally known as 'Punjabi Taliban', former Sipah-e-Sahaba, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and Jaish-e-Mohammed fighters - the Sunni sectarian and 'Kashmiri' militants who had turned against the Pakistani state following Musharraf's change of approach towards Islamist militants, post-9/11. Hakimullah assumed control of TTP operations in the area in early 2008 and immediately aligned himself with sectarian stances, often put into practice through anti-Shia raids in Kurram. Sipah-e-Sahaba, Lahskar-e-Jhangvi, and Jaish-e-Mohammed provided expertise and inspiration, while the tribals contributed muscles, a cause, and safe haven. As a consequence, Hakimullah's operations became increasingly effective, resulting in a series of well executed kidnappings and hijackings targeting NATO supply convoys. The Orakzai collaboration soon shifted the balance of power within the TTP, although Baitullah's long reign kept things stable for the sake of the common anti-Pakistan attitude.

On the other hand, if operations had definitely become more ambitious in Hakimullah's territory, back in South Waziristan among the Mehsuds, Baitullah continued governing relying first and foremost on his Mehsuds. The man entrusted with leading the Mehsuds while Baitullah 'governed' the TTP 'emirates', was his deputy Waliur Rehman, who in 2007 was promoted to control the movement's overall finances. Rehman remained extremely close to Baitullah until the end and, assuming that Baitullah was indeed about to strike a deal with Islamabad, which is plausible given that the TTP had been 'silent' on Pakistani territory since July 9th (except for the NWFP which follows a different logic), Waliur Rehman would likely have been aware of the circumstances

that had pushed his leader to talk to the government. In addition, given his proximity to JUI-F, and Kifayatullah's 'endorsement', it is not implausible to assume he might have played a role in brokering Baitullah's strategic shift. We should keep in mind that in early 2009, there had been a clear signal of a convergence between Baitullah's TTP and the Wazir faction led by Nazir and Bahadur, and that is the creation of the Shura-ul-Mujahideen, although in that case, the great common denominator had probably been drone attacks and Pakistan's blind eye policy towards it.

The role of JUI-F cannot be neglected in this context. The party appears to be among the most powerful kingmakers with regard to the Pakistani Taliban, although JUI-F's priorities may not coincide with those of the Coalition in Afghanistan. The weight of the party on the Wazir Taliban, led by Maulvi Nazir and Hafez Gul Bahadur, should be further investigated in order to gauge the party's agenda in the region. Stability in Pakistan is of paramount importance for the JUI-F, but the same does not apply to stabilizing Afghanistan, as the anti-Coalition operations carried out by the Wazir Taliban demonstrate. As suggested by Said Alam Mehsud, a prominent Pashtun nationalist politician, Nazir's and Bahadur's factions, as well Waliur Rehman, "have a strong link" to JUI-F. Mr. Mehsud, a well known personality in the NWFP, adds that the two camps competing for the TTP leadership, and for the wider Pakistani Taliban movement, have an additional, international dimension directly related to Al-Qaida and to its role in the region. The Waliur Rehman faction, backed by JUI-F, would also be supported by Arab militants and funders, while Hakimullah's faction, backed by the Pakistani sectarian groups, would be closer to the strategically crucial Uzbek contingent. These two spheres of influence at work within the TTP, in fact, would extend to the Taliban of Maulvi Nazir and Hafez Gul Bahadur. On one hand, we find the Arab-influenced faction, which is also closer to JUI-F's stances and extends to the Wazir bloc, while on the other hand, the 'Punjabi' faction are backed by the Uzbeks. As to the TTP leadership, the Arab/JUI-F faction put their weight behind Waliur Rehman, while the Punjabi (sectarian) Uzbeks support Hakimullah.

It is interesting to note that according to this analysis, the schism existing within the Pakistani Taliban movement would also have the potential to split Al-Qaida along national fault lines, Arabs vs. Uzbeks.

Mr. Mehsud appears convinced that JUI-F, a government coalition partner, would have the potential to influence the Pakistani Taliban movement. After all, Mufti Kifayatullah – interviewed by the NEFA Foundation – "attends their (the Taliban's) Shura meetings (...) whether they can tame them, this is the question that needs to be answered".

Also, we should keep in mind to what extent the tribal factor is important in the context in question. The situations discussed might be of critical importance, but they are still superimposed over complex tribal dynamics that intersect with current events, and actually pre-exist this conflict. These tribal dynamics are the primary variable in the FATA's context and the story of the Mehsud-led insurgency, in other words the story of the TTP, is written first and foremost at the tribal level, by tribal actors, and in accordance with tribal values. All the rest is impermanent, but tribal allegiance, along and across the Durand Line, is the axis around which this conflict revolves, and this case is no exception. Pakistan's parallel diplomacy has merely recognized this a priori; the idea of curbing Baitullah's Mehsud's ability to deploy a Waziri bloc, to stem his growth, follows logically.

It is important to keep in mind that following Baitullah's death, the evolution of the Taliban threat in Pakistan has certainly precipitated this situation, dramatically accelerating a trend evident for over a year. After a few years of strategic mistakes induced by unfavorable circumstances, Pakistan's security apparatus has progressively regained the initiative in relation to the Taliban movement. It succeeded in neutralizing

urban terrorism while persuading Nazir and Bahadur not to react to the American drone attacks with acts of terrorism on Pakistan territory, as they had threatened in several occasions, and despite being targeted innumerable times in the last 18 months. Despite the fact that drone attacks are de facto availed by Pakistan, in fact, stability has improved in the country, and given the odds two years ago, this can only be regarded as a remarkable result, if it is true that a country's security services are in charge of protecting that nation's best interests and not those of its allies. Pakistan has minimized Baitullah's threat while avoiding a confrontation with the rest of the Pakistani Taliban movement, which appears today more solid than ever. And, if it is true that a security apparatus needs a problem to solve to be generously funded, then a manageable problem is the best possible scenario for the actor in question. And what better definition for the so called pro-Government Taliban?