



Part III of a NEFA Special Report: Militant Groups Active in the Bajaur Region

**NEFA Senior Investigator Claudio Franco
August 2009**



[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.]

Introduction

After years of ambivalent policies, Pakistan appears to be determined, finally, to counter militant groups in the country's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), with a particular focus on annihilating the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) network that had been led by Baitullah Mehsud until his death in a CIA drone attack.¹

Having diminished the militant threat in Swat, Islamabad immediately redirected military assets to South Waziristan, while American UAVs pounded Taliban hideouts in the area. At last, the policies of Pakistan appear to be coherent with those of the U.S., although the approach of the two allies remains largely different when non TTP Taliban groups are concerned. Islamabad, in fact, although determined to annihilate the threat posed by Baitullah and associates, remains apparently available to negotiate with those Taliban commanders who do not respond to the authority of Baitullah Mehsud, such as Maulvi Nazir Ahmed in the Wana area of South Waziristan. Recent reports from Wana seem to confirm the possibility of talks with Nazir's Wazir faction, while Hafez Gul Bahadur of North Waziristan, following repeated drone attacks in the areas controlled by his tribal Taliban fighters, seems to have re-entered Baitullah's orbit, at least to some extent. The U.S. has repeatedly demonstrated its lack of interest in distinctions between those Taliban who are active exclusively in Afghanistan and TTP fighters who are also fighting the Pakistani government east of the Durand Line; accordingly, UAVs have consistently hit the Taliban-al Qaida network in the FATAs wherever possible, despite the work carried out behind the scenes by Pakistani state actors in order to rein in those insurgents who are ready to put on hold operations on Pakistani territory, namely the Wazir Taliban factions (both Uthmanzai in North Waziristan and Ahmedzai in the Wana area).

Today at last, after months of apparently contrasting policies, Pakistan and the U.S. are directing their military assets towards the areas controlled by Baitullah, prompting a spate of suicide attacks in Pakistan and ongoing clashes in Waziristan, as Pakistan ground troops approach the region ruled for years by TTP insurgents. Certainly Pakistan has changed course where Taliban insurgents are concerned, starting in August 2008 with the Army operation in Bajaur agency. The Bajaur offensive, in fact, seems to be the starting point of a different kind of military engagement, a

¹ "Pakistani Taliban Chief Killed by U.S., Aide Says," Associated Press, August 7, 2009.

coordinated effort which culminated with the Swat operation in April 2009. Controlling the former Malakand Division entailed reining in the area bordering the restive Kunar province in order to cut off the insurgents based in Malakand from the Tribal Areas and the well trained Bajauri fighters led by Faqir Mohammed. In other words, the new military leadership in Pakistan, led by General Kayani, confronted the militants' threat systematically, with an eye at severing possible escape routes for the Swati insurgents to escape west or receive reinforcements from the unstable border areas and Afghanistan.

The NEFA Foundation has closely followed the evolution of the Taliban insurgency in Pakistan's west and recent developments in the region. The result is a series of reports aimed at covering the situation in the field, starting with a comprehensive analysis of the military operation in Bajaur.²

The third part of this ongoing series examines the militants operating in the Bajaur region. Although the area in question is traditionally dominated by commanders who by and large hail from the TNSM rank and file, the militants in Bajaur are not the homogenous entity we may expect on the basis of media reports. The TTP is surely dominated by the figure of Faqir Mohammed and his senior role within the overall movement guarantees effective representation to the agency within the TTP. Working together with the TTP insurgents, however, there are other significant groups based in one or the other of the area's tehsils, or districts. These groups are often Taliban inspired and linked to former TNSM cadres, to the Afghan Taliban, and/or to foreign militants. Nevertheless, there are examples of Taliban-like entities having emerged purely to 'protect' the interests of a specific tribal group or potentate. In these cases, the emphasis on the Taliban brand of Deobandi ideology is clearly less marked and, at times, there appears to be a dangerous proximity to criminal elements, a proximity that has surely affected the Taliban's credibility as a quasi-institutional actor.

The ongoing series is based mainly on the NEFA team's first hand research in the field.

Faqir Mohammed

Faqir Mohammed leads the mainstream faction of the TTP in Bajaur. A qualified cleric and an experienced Jihadist, Maulana Faqir Mohammed was among the TTP initiators in December 2007. Named Baitullah's deputy since day one, Faqir has repeatedly revealed his allegiance to Mullah Omar and conceives the Pakistan Taliban phenomenon as being inherently linked to the Afghan Jihad and primarily focused on anti-Coalition operations across the border.

Faqir Mohammed is known to be a moderate and adverse to some of the methods utilized by the Taliban elsewhere in the FATAs and in Swat, such as torching girls school or beheading "spies" and traitors. However, the Bajauri leader made clear on several occasions³ his proximity to al Qaida in the fight against Coalition forces and reiterated his willingness to extend support to them. Interviewed by The NEFA Foundation in 2008, for example, Maulana Faqir Mohammed commented on the 9/11 attacks as follows: "Things have changed for the better (after 9/11), it has sustained this struggle. It has awakened Muslims, and the Ummah has come to know who their enemy is. If the attack had taken place earlier, many Muslim lands would be free from foreign occupation by now."

² See part I of the series at http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefa_ttp0709part1.pdf and part II at http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefa_ttp0709part2.pdf.

³ Faqir Mohammed interviewed by The NEFA Foundation. August/October 2008. <http://www.nefafoundation.org/multimedia>.

In the last few months, Faqir Mohammed seems to have built a solid relationship with the tribesmen representing the authorities, and recent attacks in Bajaur are probably linked to Mohmand's insurgents operating inside Bajaur.

Maulvi Omar, the TTP's official spokesman and Faqir Mohammed's deputy, is another prominent leader, even beyond the boundaries of the agency. Maulvi Omar is an effective communicator and talked to the media regularly until the start of the military operation, providing the public with the TTP's point of view whenever deemed necessary. His media appearances were of critical importance for the movement, and Omar was targeted by the Army in Badan and was injured in the first Damadola attack, in January 2006. Maulvi Omar defined al Qaida and the Taliban as the name of the same ideology. The term "Taliban", according to the TTP leader, would be used when fighting at home, in the Pak-Afghan region, while "al Qaida" is applied to international Jihadists. According to NEFA's sources, the militants in Bajaur numbered between twelve and fifteen thousand, most of whom were fighting with the TTP or with groups affiliated to it. After the military offensive, certainly the TTP had lost assets in the Agency, but the local TTP was too solid and too entrenched within the fabric of society to be written off so quickly.

Karwan-e-Naimatullah

Haji Naimatullah controlled, until a few months ago, one of the largest groups active in the agency, overseeing approximately 1500 "trained" fighters before the start of the operation. His involvement against the Army ranged from minimal to non-existent, but several of his fighters left the group to join the mainstream TTP last fall. 38 years old, Naimatullah is relatively new in terms of militancy, having joined the movement as recently as 2006. Naimatullah is based in the northern Salarzai District and heads the Karwan-e-Naimatullah group, a faction largely held together by the fact that they represent the Salarzai area versus the better placed cousins based in neighbouring Mamund, undeniably the capital of northern militancy. The young commander was a timber merchant in his native Bajaur, when he joined the insurgents seeking power and influence.

After a few months in 2005 serving as a local organizer for the militants, Naimatullah joined the Taliban in 2006 as one of Faqir Mohammed's most trusted allies. By mid 2007, however, he had already created his personal armed faction and he distanced himself from Faqir on the eve of the military operation, in late July 2008.⁴ Although the rift was partially healed in the following months, Naimatullah's militia cannot be considered an integral part of the TTP, but rather as a partially autonomous entity whose interests often converge with those of the local mainstream Taliban.

Overall, well-placed sources in Bajaur describe Naimatullah's group as probably the less militant in terms of political Islamism and its existence seems to be strictly linked to the last few years of upheaval in the region.

Naimatullah made clear his reluctance to engage even in defensive operations against the Pakistani military, and, between August 2008 and February 2009, Karwan-e-Naimatullah's fighters targeted their opponents on only two occasions. Interestingly, in both cases, Naimatullah did not hit the Pakistani Army but members and/or leaders of the anti-Taliban tribal lashkar raised in Salarzai since the fall of 2008. The formation of lashkars, or tribal militias, were encouraged by the government in order to counter the Taliban movement exploiting the fighting skills of the tribesmen themselves. The Salarzai Lashkar, formed in September 2008, appeared to be among the most effective militias raised by the tribesmen in the recent past, and was the first lashkar established in Bajaur

⁴ Interviews by the author. December 2008. Peshawar, Pakistan.

in 2008. When Naimatullah felt that his powerbase was being threatened, he did not hesitate to intervene, using exactly the weapon of choice of his Taliban associates: suicide bombers. Three suicide operatives were dispatched in October 2008 to strike at a meeting between Lashkar leaders, but one of the bombers was killed and two arrested by the tribesmen. Naimatullah's people, however, did not desist and shortly afterwards, on November 6, 2008⁵, they blew up the venue of a second meeting between the founder of the Salarzai Lashkar and some associates: 22 died and 45 were injured as a consequence of the suicide attack. It is clear that Naimatullah's support network is strictly linked to the Salarzai subtribe dominating the agency's northernmost district, and he does intervene when his feud is threatened. On the other hand, it is clear that his agenda and his priorities are quite different from the TTP's. Naimatullah, for example, does not normally cross the border to fight in Afghanistan. As mentioned, Haji Naimatullah broke with Faqir Mohammed on the eve of the military operation.

According to reliable reports, the rift between the two commanders was caused by the fact that Naimatullah had kidnapped vehicles and soldiers belonging to the Pakistani paramilitary forces; Faqir forced Naimatullah to surrender the prisoners and Naimatullah eventually complied, but did not like it. In addition, an additional problem involving foreigners contributed to the problem: Faqir had expelled two Arab al Qaida dissidents who had sought refuge east of the Durand Line; the two, named Hafs and Mansour, crossed to Naimatullah's territory, and he gave them protection for a brief period. They left for Afghanistan when things became difficult for Naimatullah, but their interference was enough to mar the relationship between the Salarzai leader and Faqir Mohammed.

It must be noted that Naimatullah lost credibility when he claimed responsibility for the massacre of 40 people attending the Salarzai Lashkar's meeting, in November 2008. Almost every family in the Salarzai area was represented among the victims of the attack and this ruined Naimatullah's reputation and his group's appeal once and for all. In addition, we must take into consideration that the Karwan-e-Naimatullah lacks a solid tribal powerbase, as the group's members and commanders are mainly young militants without any practical experience where Jihad is concerned; age and experience, unfortunately for the 38 year old leader, still command respect in the FATAs and young members are less effective than senior Jihadists. The only experienced Jihadist commander fighting with the group, a local named Abdul Latif, was killed last year, leaving Naimatullah to lead a fighting force that was more dangerous on paper than when engaged in the field.

In other words, while Naimatullah's group was capable of kidnapping Army vehicles and a handful of soldiers, resisting a sustained military offensive proved to be a completely different endeavour and many among the Salarzai Taliban melted away in the mountain as soon as the shelling started.

Today, although Naimatullah managed to flee and avoid capture, his group's operational potential is significantly diminished, and the same applies to his relationship with the TTP leadership. It is unclear how many of the approximately 1500 fighters remained loyal to Naimatullah following the Pakistani military offensive.

Reihan

Waliur Rehman (a.k.a. Reihan) hails from Damadola and heads Jaish ul Islam, an outfit whose degree of allegiance to Faqir Mohammed's mainstream TTP is at the very

⁵ "Suicide Bomber Strikes at Pakistani Tribal Meeting in Bajaur," The Long War Journal, November 6, 2008, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/11/suicide_bomber_strik.php#ixzz0LoNB1GV6.

least dubious. Jaish ul Islam was formed⁶ in mid 2008 by Waliur Rehman and those commanders, mainly based in Mamund and Chamarkand, were opposed to Faqir's moderate stances in relation to offensive operations in Pakistani territory. In the spring and summer of 2008, in fact, the TTP leader made public his unwillingness to target Pakistani forces several times, making clear that the TTP would only engage in defensive Jihad against the Pakistani Army⁷, while focusing as much as possible on anti-Coalition operations in Afghanistan. In other terms, Waliur Rehman was so self-confident about his support base that in mid 2008 he broke with Faqir Mohammed and formed his own group.

Between 32 and 35 years old, reportedly a former student of medicine, Reihan has often constituted a problem for Faqir Mohammed; according to reliable witnesses interviewed by The NEFA Foundation in 2008, during the early days of the TTP, Waliur Rehman attempted to launch a bid for the leadership on the basis of his family's links to al Qaida's foreign operatives. Reihan, in fact, had given his sister to be married to Sheikh Usman, an Arab operative with a Finnish passport, who was killed during the first Damadola airstrike in January 2006.

Damadola certainly plays a critical role where the Bajauri insurgency is concerned. Situated at the heart of Mamund tehsil, the town gained prominence because of the presence of foreign operatives hosted by local families, and certainly Waliur Rehman's family is first on the list when it is a matter of providing refuge and support to al Qaida and associates. Reihan's credibility and power base in fact rests primarily on these close links with foreign Jihadists. Ayman al Zawahri has repeatedly been sighted in Damadola and, reportedly, the al Qaida's deputy's son in law, Abd-al Raman al Maghrebi, who was killed in the second Damadola strike in October 2006, was a frequent visitor.

Notwithstanding the divergences existing between Reihan and the TTP leadership, when questioned by The NEFA Foundation⁸, a local commander who requested anonymity stated clearly that although Jaish ul Islam was not an integral part of the TTP, they were still complying with Faqir's order to avoid a major rift within the movement. However, Waliur Rehman is still refusing to attend TTP meetings and he appears to grant privilege to foreign Qaidist allies, rather than the Pakistani Taliban leaders.

Maulana Ismail, Reihan's older brother, is another prominent commander hailing from the Damadola area. He reportedly controlled between 200 to 300 fighters when the military operation started in August 2008.

Reihan represents better than any other Bajauri commander the influence of al Qaida-inspired clerics on locals in Pakistan's FATAs. Swift capital punishment for "spies" and/or traitors, executions that have been criticized by Faqir Mohammed himself, are a clear symptom of Takfiri influences on Jaish ul Islam's men. Reihan reportedly controls one thousand fighters and reliable sources maintain that Reihan's potential was not significantly diminished by the military offensive.

Dr. Ismail

Dr. Ismail is another prominent commander active in Bajaur. According to interviews carried out by the NEFA Foundation. A long time associate of the Jemaat-e-Ulema Islam (JUI-F), a Pakistani political party that has repeatedly championed the

⁶ Interviews by the author. December 2008. Peshawar, Pakistan.

⁷ Faqir Mohammed interviewed by The NEFA Foundation.
<http://www.nefafoundation.org/multimedia>.

⁸ Interviews by the author. Peshawar, Pakistan. November 2008.

Taliban cause in the past, Ismail reiterated several times that his exclusive focus is Afghanistan; in other words, Dr. Ismail is not willing to fight against Pakistani forces and his men essentially fell back towards the group's bastions in northern Bajaur as the Army was advancing in late 2008. According to confidential information gathered by NEFA, Dr. Ismail has left the Agency and moved to Lower Dir, reportedly to the Munda area, and has disengaged from armed militancy.

Maulana Abdullah

Maulana Abdullah is one of the most important TTP commanders, heading the mujahideen troops in the Charmang area of Chamarkahand and in Utmankhel District. Hailing from Bandai locality near Loisam – the main town in the Charmang area - the Maulana is 30-32 years old. Well-versed in religious knowledge, Abdullah is madrassa-educated and he refined his course of studies at the prestigious Dars-e-Nizami in Panjpir, Swabi. Abdullah hails from a land-owning family and farming had been his main source of income until he joined the TNSM in the late '90s and soon afterwards began his long term association with Faqir Mohammed. Maulana Abdullah has remained a solid asset for Faqir Mohammed, although he was certainly influenced by the sizeable presence of Ziaur Rehman's hardcore Jihadists. Abdullah and Ziaur Rehman were probably the ones who engaged the Pakistani army the most and Charmang was certainly the most difficult area to stabilize, almost on par with Mamund, in particular the Loisam, Tangkhata, Rashakai areas.

According to insiders' reports gathered by NEFA, Qari Ziaur Rehman was fighting under Maulana Abdullah during the first phase of the military offensive, thus exponentially increasing the Charmang Taliban forces. In turn, Abdullah never ceased to obey leadership orders. It is unclear to what extent Ziaur Rehman took personal initiatives against the advancing arm, but if that is the case, we are talking of isolated cases and, overall, Maulana Abdullah maintained control of Loisam and the rest of Charmang until his men retreated to the mountains in accordance with the cease-fire brokered by tribal mediators in February 2009.

Ziaur Rehman

Afghan commander Ziaur Rehman, hailing from Kunar province, is another significant Taliban leader active in Bajaur and he epitomizes better than any other commander the integration between Afghan Taliban and Pakistan militants across the border. Approximately 32 year old,⁹ Ziaur Rehman heads a significant battalion-sized force of, reportedly, 500 well-trained fighters, mainly Afghans, but with the addition of scores of Pakistani tribesmen. In Afghanistan, he fights under Sheikh Dost Mohammed, the overall Taliban leader for Kunar and Nuristan. Ziaur Rehman moves constantly between his native Kunar, as well as Mohmand and Bajaur agencies. Reportedly, he left Bajaur in mid-November and settled in the Mohammadghat, a border town in Mohmand agency. Until then however, his men had offered staunch resistance to the advance of the military, mainly in the Charmang area of Chamarkand tehsil, a strategically critical corner of the agency.

Ziaur Rehman's fighters are considered to be among the most committed mujahideen in the northern FATAs and their leader's ideological stance is very close to al Qaida's positions.

⁹ Interviews by the author, November 2008.

Salar Massoud

Commander Salar Massoud is a marginal, but sometimes fastidious figure hailing from Mamund District. A former TNSM member who converged within the TTP in 2007, Salar Massoud attempted to launch a bid to challenge Faqir Mohammed's leadership seven months later. In July 2008, Salar started to collect signatures aimed at re-discussing the Bajaur TTP leadership in accordance with the traditional shura-based mechanism. Salar Massoud, however, did not command enough respect to attempt such a bold move without important backers, and he relied entirely on three important figures to gain the credibility needed to question Faqir's leadership. The three senior commanders in question were Dr. Abdul Wahab, Commander Muneer, and Commander Abdul Hamid, all hailing from the Damadola area and each heading a significant mujahideen force. Having apparently secured support in Damadola, Salar Massoud announced to the media the creation of a new group named "al Jihad". Immediately afterwards, however, the Damadola three reiterated their loyalty to the TTP and denied having provided support to the opposition bid. This was more than enough to quell Massoud's initiative and the commander has kept a low profile ever since.

Chamarkand town and the surrounding areas are controlled by the TTP Mohmand of Omar Khalid, who often enter Bajaur agency to strike against Government forces.

Mohmand

The main player among Taliban insurgents in Mohmand is currently believed to be Qari Shakeel, formerly in charge of the strategically critical Lower Mohmand area. Although Shakeel is certainly the commander who created more problems for the military advance in Mohmand, Omar Khalid is still considered the movement's leading figure in the Agency. Believed killed in a January 2009 military strike,¹⁰ Omar Khalid was reportedly recently sighted in the company of his deputy, Qari Shakeel.

Ihtishamul Haq (a.k.a. Abu Hanifa) and Commander Wajih are active in Lower Mohmand, while Commander Luqman is leading Taliban in Pindyali tehsil. The Islahi (Reform) Committee of the TTP, led by Sangeen, a cousin of Omar Khalid, has been ineffective for months now.¹¹ However, the TTP still have complete control over Tehsil Lakaro, constituting 30 percent of the agency and more than 40 percent of its population. The TTP easily conducts hit and run operations in Yakagond Tehsil, Pandyalay, Khawazai in Bhai Daag, and in the 25 disputed villages near Peshawar. Although its assets have certainly been diminished, the TTP is still active in the Agency, engaging mainly in actions directed against opponents, in particular outlaws. They killed five known criminals on March 4, 2009, and three days earlier, on March 1 they killed Malik Hazrat Khan, an influential tribesman who was assassinated¹² near Michni on March 1. Kahn was an associate of Noor Sham, a notorious kidnapper killed publicly by the TTP.

Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), or a surrogate, was also active in the Agency until the summer of 2008 and must still have some following, although the group has been banned by the dominant TTP faction of Omar Khalid. Muslim Khan (aka Shah Sahib), in fact, led the Ahl-e-Hadith group that stemmed from an LeT camp situated near the border, a camp set up to assist LeT fighters returning from Afghanistan in late 2001.

¹⁰ "Taliban Commander Omar Khalid Believed Dead?", Daily News, January 22, 2008, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009%5C01%5C22%5Cstory_22-1-2009_pg7_23.

¹¹ Interviews by the author. March 2009. Peshawar, Pakistan.

¹² Interviews by the author. March 2009. Peshawar, Pakistan.

Recruited within the TTP, Shah Sahib was apparently supporting a disobedient Qari Ziaur Rehman who had rejected Omar Khalid's orders to leave Mohmand. Omar Khalid confronted and annihilated his rival in July 2008, killing 10 of the L-e-T men and making 80 prisoners. There are reports¹³ that Baitullah judged Omar Khalid's reaction to be excessive in the Shah Sahib case.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Hrakat ul Mujaheddin were also well represented in Mohmand, but its key leaders have now been integrated within the TTP.

In general, it seems clear that militancy in Bajaur is by no means a homogenous phenomenon. There is, in fact, a clear difference between groups like Jaish ul Islam, which are defined as being hardcore, well-trained Jihadists with close links to the international al Qaida-inspired network, and Karwan-e-Naimatullah, whose members are more often than not local youths who joined the insurgency without a solid Islamist background and proper military training. Naimatullah's mujahideen, although numerous, did not have the bodies necessary to withstand a sustained offensive. On the other hand, Reihan's fighters were determined to achieve martyrdom in battle and many of them did. Ideology is the real discriminate in this context, although the age of the fighters in question is also important in conservative, patriarchal north western Pakistan. Those Taliban fighters who really made the difference in battle are either veterans who honed their skills against the Soviets, 25 years ago, or the new breed of militants indoctrinated by extremist clerics with a penchant for Takfiri methods and the cult of martyrdom. All the others were extremely useful to widen the area under control of the Taliban, while things were going well for the militants; as soon as the military moved in, however, the insurgents could only rely on a limited number of effective fighters.

The role played by foreigners in general and Arabs in particular is of critical importance in relation to motivating the local Taliban to fight or to recruit more manpower for the cause. Seldom, however, did they cross the border into the tribal areas in order to fight, with an exception made for a restricted number of Uzbeks, who appear to function as the Taliban's special forces. A sizeable number of Uzbeks, in fact, were reportedly shifted by Baitullah from Waziristan to Darra Adam Khel and Bajaur to provide support to local militants under attack; for example, in Bajaur, they were sighted fighting in the Charmang area with Ziaur Rehman.

According to intelligence gathered by the NEFA Foundation, Arabs never cross the border from Afghanistan in large numbers, they always enter the FATAs in groups of a maximum of six, in order to avoid being spotted by the Coalition or by the Pakistani Frontier Corps who man the Durand Line border passes. They travel to the area to rest or to receive medical treatment, when they are not dispatched there to provide support. Support, where Arabs are concerned, essentially means inspiring, motivating, and training local militants under pressure. Arabs confer prestige and power, as seen in the case of Waliur Rehman.

¹³ "Taliban Control of Mohmand Highlights Failures of Peace Negotiations," Long War Journal, July 24, 2008, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/07/taliban_control_of_m.php.