



The Evolution of the Taliban in Pakistan during the February-May 2008 Period: The Peace Accord Era

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Overview and Analysis

Following a turbulent end to 2007 and an extraordinarily intense pre-electoral month in January 2008, the Taliban-inspired insurgency in Pakistan engaged in three months of peace negotiations with a government led by new Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, a Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) member who released a series of conciliatory statements as soon as he took office in March 2008.

The election results and the clear shift in policy proposed by the new Gilani cabinet in relation to the conflict in North Western Pakistan have resulted in a drop in both the frequency and intensity of military operations, on both sides, throughout most of the traditional hotspots in North and South Waziristan, Bajaur, and Swat. There were exceptions though, notably the series of suicide attacks followed by missile or drone incursions against rebel positions between February 24 and March 16.

Some degree of insurgent activity could be observed in Malakand, the Darra Adam Khel area, the Bara tehsil in Khyber Agency, and Mohmand Agency¹, but it did not necessarily involve Taliban-affiliated fighters. And the motives behind the clashes ranged from global Jihadism to local law-and-order issues, as in the case of the Khyber Agency, where an Islamic Army was fighting an assortment of tribal drug and liquor producers and dealers².

If the fervent insurgent activity in January and the beginning of February must be considered with the approaching elections in mind, the same should apply to the relative calm experienced during the February to April trimester, when negotiations were at the top of the agenda for both sides in the conflict. The process seems to have started on February 2, when eight of Mullah Fazlullah's senior aides were freed.³ On the same day, the military announced a ceasefire in South Waziristan⁴.

¹ See February 2008 Appendix by Ron Sandee

² Imtiaz Ali, "Khyber Tribal Agency: A New Hub of Islamist Militancy in Pakistan"
<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2374201>

³ "Eight Fazlullah aides released on bail"

http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008\02\02\story_2-2-2008_pg7_19

⁴ Bill Roggio, "Operations in South Waziristan halted for peace talks"

Before the elections, the most intense spell was undeniably the period of time between February 9, when an explosion claimed 25 victims in Charsadda during an Awami National Party (ANP) rally, and February 12, when Mullah Mansoor Dadullah was captured by Pakistani security forces while staying at a madrassa in Balochistan. Between these two crucial events, the ANP was targeted in North Waziristan, when suspected insurgents attacked the party's local offices, leaving 10 people dead.

There are widespread doubts about who might have had an interest in striking at the ANP, a nationalist Pashtun party well integrated in the social fabric of the NWFP, before the elections. Several well-placed sources have excluded the involvement of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operatives in the Charsadda bombing, because such a vicious attack which would have discredited the TTP given the number of civilian casualties. The targets do not seem to hold any clear strategic importance, nor does it seem the TTP would have benefited on the eve of crucial elections.

The February 18 elections introduced a number of new players into the Pakistani scenario; the result of a regime change dictated for once by electoral results and not the intervention of the military. The Pakistan Muslim League, Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q), also known as the King's Party, an entity created by Musharraf's inner circle to deal with Parliament and to act as a democratic vehicle for the General/President, suffered an unequivocal defeat, becoming the country's third-largest faction in Parliament. Conversely, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) was propelled to the threshold of Prime Minister House by the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, killed in mysterious circumstances on December 27, 2007. Along with the PPP, Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N) emerged as the other victor of the electoral contest. The Pashtun Awami National Party (ANP), a well-established, left-leaning regional party, triumphed in NWFP, while the incumbent coalition, the Islamist Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), boycotted the elections. The MQM retained control in Karachi, confirming the fragmented, regionalistic nature of Pakistani politics.

The election results were honored by Parliament when Yousuf Raza Gilani was appointed Prime Minister on March 22 and sworn in on March 25. Gilani, a respected Bhutto loyalist who spent five years in jail for refusing to join the King's Party in the aftermath of Musharraf's coup, was hand-picked for the job by Asif Ali Zardari, Bhutto's widower and the PPP's new co-chairman, together with his 19-year-old son, Bilawal Zardari Bhutto.

Gilani swiftly announced that Pakistan would cease fighting "America's war" in the region and called for immediate negotiations⁵. To that end, the newly appointed cabinet invited the tribes to political dialogue, and proposed the revision of the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR)⁶, a legal tool devised by the British to administer justice in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) without always, if ever, conforming to the rule of law applied in the rest of the country.

http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/02/operations_in_south.php

⁵ Simon Robinson, "Pakistan's PPP Chooses Premier"

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1724968,00.html>

⁶ I. A. Rehman, "The way to a graceful exit"

<http://www.dawn.com/2008/04/03/op.htm>

These statements by the new Prime Minister proved to be endearing, and coupled with discrete diplomacy, were apparently enough to earn Gilani the trust of his tribal interlocutors. In other words, Gilani succeeded where he needed to succeed; negotiations were back on top of the government's agenda and would be pursued with increased emphasis and determination. Dialogue, Gilani stated, would be the government's strategy of choice in the tribal areas. The Army's harsh attitude would be replaced by mediators, politicians, and tribal elders tasked with establishing a common platform to solve problems. Accordingly, while Gilani was assuming office, between late February and early March, the government's diplomats set discretely to work in Swat, South Waziristan, Malakand, and in most of the other hotspots "secured" by the Army over the past five years.

On February 24, Mullah Obaidullah Akhund, one of Mullah Omar's key aides and a member of the 10-man Rabarhi Shura, was re-arrested⁷ in the eastern city of Lahore while engaged in fundraising for the Afghan Taliban. The following day, in what might be seen as an act of revenge for Obaidullah's arrest, Ahmed Baig, the Surgeon-General of the Pakistan Army, was killed in Rawalpindi⁸. General Ahmed Baig's assassination was the first suicide bombing carried out in Pakistan after the February 18 elections.

Observed from the outside, it would be difficult to ignore the impressive series of attacks that followed the arrest⁹ of Mullah Obaidullah on February 24. Over the following eight to ten days, the insurgents struck against Pakistani infrastructure inside and outside the contested tribal areas. The violence started with the Surgeon-General suicide attack, and accelerated dramatically after the drone attack¹⁰ on the Azam Warsak area on February 28. The insurgents struck on February 29 killing 38 people at the funeral of a policeman¹¹ who had been killed in the line of duty. Two days later, the Taliban attacked a jirga of anti-Taliban tribals, killing 40¹². It is clear that in both cases, the insurgents struck at high-density targets aiming at a high number of victims. On March 4, the Military College was the target¹³; two suicide operatives brazenly attacked the gates, leaving seven dead and several injured.

Mullah Obaidullah was and still is a crucial Taliban leader, and his arrest while engaged in fundraising activities might have been interpreted as a betrayal by segments of the movement. Certainly, the series of attacks described above is unique since the February 18th elections, and given Obaidullah's prominence, a reaction by the insurgents was probably to be expected. However, even if the logic behind Taliban vengeance for the

⁷ "Security agencies arrest Mullah Obaidullah again"
http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008%5C02%5C25%5Cstory_25-2-2008_pg7_10

⁸ "Rawalpindi blast: 8 killed", <http://www.thenews.com.pk/updates.asp?id=38440>

⁹ "Mullah Omar's deputy arrested"
<http://www.dawn.com/2007/03/02/top1.htm>

¹⁰ "Six foreigners among 8 killed in Waziristan: Locals suspect missile strike from across border"
<http://www.dawn.com/2008/02/29/top1.htm>

¹¹ "Carnage at slain officer's funeral: DSP killed in Lakki Marwat blast; 38 die in Mingora suicide attack" http://www.ipcs.org/Mar_08_pakistan.pdf

¹² 40 killed, 35 injured in Darra Adamkhel's suicide attack
http://www.app.com.pk/en_/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=30472&Itemid=1

¹³ "Suicide Bomber Attacks Pakistan's Naval War College"
<http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2008-03/2008-03-04-voa7.cfm?CFID=58514768&CFTOKEN=67174984>

Obaidullah arrest is an attractive hypothesis, and may hold some degree of truth, NEFA sources maintain that Obaidullah was never explicitly pursued by the authorities, and that his arrest might have very well been a matter of mistaken identity.

After a short relative calm, on March 11, the Taliban went for a high-profile target, attacking Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) headquarters in Lahore¹⁴. The FIA often houses FBI teams deployed in eastern Pakistan. Well-placed sources have confirmed to NEFA that the attackers' priority was to strike at the foreign teams housed in the building. The American FBI has apparently become a favored target for the Taliban in Pakistan. Four days after the Lahore attack, the *Luna Caprese*, an Italian restaurant in Islamabad often frequented by FBI personnel, was blown up by a suicide operative; four FBI agents were wounded¹⁵ in that attack.

The reason for the insurgents' vengeful attitude towards the American FBI is probably clear, but these two operations are noteworthy as demonstrations of the remarkable effectiveness of the Taliban intelligence system, a loose structure which is nonetheless able to gather useful intelligence on Coalition assets working undercover in the region, and their ability to strike directly at disguised and well-protected objectives. This is a clear indication of the insurgents' ability to infiltrate Pakistani society with informants and sleeper cells ready to strike; inform; and provide support, safehouses, and logistics when necessary. Operations of this kind should constitute a clear warning to Western decision makers, both in the military as well as in the civilian administration. The Taliban has outgrown the premise of a national insurgency in order to become a regional, Pashtun-based militant movement tightly connected to al-Qaida.

The TTP seems more and more integrated with al-Qaida both from an ideological and a strategic-military standpoint. Interviewed on video for the first time by NEFA at an undisclosed location¹⁶, Maulvi Omar stated that the two outfits, al-Qaida and the Taliban, are simply the domestic and international arms of the same Jihadist organization: "There is no difference between Al-Qaida and the Taliban. The formation of Taliban and al-Qaida was based on a precise ideology. Today, the Taliban and Al-Qaida have become an ideology. Whoever works for these organizations is fighting against the cruelty of the Kafirs [infidels]. Both groups are fighting for the supremacy of Allah and his Kalma [profession of faith]. However, those fighting in foreign countries are called Al-Qaida, while those fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan are called Taliban. In fact, both are the name of one ideology. The aim and objectives of both the organizations are the same."¹⁷

In the words of Maulvi Omar, TTP deputy in Bajaur and prominent TTP spokesperson, al-Qaida and the TTP/Taliban are two faces of the same coin; the former is fighting "infidels" on the international front, while the latter is devoted to Jihad within the Pak-Afghan region. The integration of the two entities started with the arrival of Usama bin Laden in Kandahar in 1996 as an honored guest of the Taliban leadership. That relationship later progressed, enduring adversities and triumphs; from the Tomahawk attacks ordered by

¹⁴ "Twin suicide attacks kill 26 in Pakistan's Lahore"

<http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5j2dfiW2PrI4cGsop-VaxrEhFtORg>

¹⁵ "Four FBI agents hurt in Pakistan bombing"

<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/03/16/pakistan/index.html>

¹⁶ NEFA interview, April 2008

¹⁷ NEFA interview with Maulvi Omar, April 2008

President Clinton on the Khost training complex in August 1998¹⁸, to the 9/11 operation, planned and supported by al-Qaida from Afghanistan.

The Taliban insurgency cannot be regarded exclusively as a military phenomenon, as the problem is rooted in the peculiar fabric of segments of Pakistani society, a context where a Muslim Brotherhood-type Islamization process coexists with the instinctively conservative stances of tribal Islamism, thus producing ideal conditions for Islamist militancy to exist and proliferate. Pakistan is a complex country and by no means can be described as an Islamist society, but Western-style secularism is limited to the urban areas, and the potential recruiting basin for Islamists is exceptionally vast. Militancy has become a national problem in the span of five years, and today the Taliban can rely on a network spanning two countries and two worlds; from the metropolitan setting of Karachi to the dust and mud-brick houses of North Waziristan, the Taliban are operating and raising funds among the business community and the middle classes. The insurgents are not perceived as criminals or terrorists, notwithstanding years of propaganda funded mostly with Western resources, but as underdogs fighting for a just cause. They are perfect material for zakat (Muslim charitable tithe) donations, in other words, and are certainly regarded as legitimate political actors, if not as "Muslim heroes". It is worth pointing out that we are not describing a world of undercover fundraising and murky donors, but of perfectly legitimate businessmen who may, at times, donate to charities that are loosely connected to the movement. By and large, the insurgency is not perceived as damaging, and the Taliban's well-tested formula of law, order, and pious demeanor is working wonders in remote areas like Swat, Bajaur, and Waziristan, where secular politics is perceived as a synonym of "corruption" and religious insurgencies are a cyclic occurrence. Western policy-makers should remember that religious insurgencies along the border have been a regular occurrence when inspired by a foreign enemy. The Swat area, in particular, was traditionally ruled by an Akhund, a political-spiritual Amir, who caused endless trouble for the British in the mid-19th century.¹⁹

On March 12, the US-led Coalition responded with a series of precision-guided missiles targeting a Haqqani network compound 1.5 km within the Pakistani side of the border, in or around the village of Lwara Mundi²⁰. The airstrike came 24 hours after Haqqani's group claimed responsibility for the attack on the Sebari military compound in Eastern Afghanistan. According to a Western media outlet²¹, the Lwara Mundi compound was the location of a high-profile meeting between key commanders of the group. The March 12 attack was the first confirmed cross-border attack by the US on Pakistani territory²².

The Haqqani network seems to act more and more like a quasi-autonomous organization within the wider Taliban movement: a group within a group, in other words, linked to the Taliban in terms of chain of command, strategy, and logistics but autonomous, if necessary, in terms of financing, operational capabilities, and control of the territory in the greater Khost-Miramshah area. The Haqqani network's strategic and

¹⁸ "Pak cries foul over US revenge strike"

<http://www.indianexpress.com/res/web/ple/ie/daily/19980822/23450784.html>

¹⁹ Sana Haroon, *Islam in the Indo-Afghan border land*. London, Hurst & Co. 2007

²⁰ <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2374049>

²¹ "Unprecedented Coalition strike nails the Haqqani Network in North Waziristan"

http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/03/unprecedented_coalit.php

²² "Pakistan protests US Lwara Mundi strike"

http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008%5C03%5C14%5Cstory_14-3-2008_pg7_1

operational importance is confirmed by the allied operations targeting its commanders in the last few months. At least three high-profile field commanders have been killed since December 2007: Mullah Signee, Mullah Manan, and Darim Sedgai, the latter killed by unknown gunmen in western Pakistan²³.

A few days later, in the immediate aftermath of the Luna Caprese bombing, a second cross-border attack – at least according to the reports of locals – targeted the house of a Wazir tribal elder, killing 20, including several foreigners²⁴. According to press reports, another house was hit in a separate missile attack, which obliterated the building used by Arab and Uzbek fighters²⁵. These cross-border missile attacks may offer an alternative to the controversial drone operations that have so often enraged segments of Pakistani public opinion. Launched from Afghanistan, these attacks do not necessarily require the collaboration of the Pakistani military, thus making life easier for the main regional US ally in the War on Terror.

As mentioned above, judging by the statements given by Prime Minister Gilani, Pakistan is now looking to diplomacy and negotiations, miles away from the Washington-inspired tit-for-tat approach favored by General Musharraf. Gilani appears to know what he is doing and, for the time being at least, will have the political authority to steer the course of Pakistan's anti-terrorism policy. His position, however, will be mitigated to a certain extent by US Ambassador to Islamabad, Anne W. Patterson. For the time being, Musharraf is still officially Washington's man in Islamabad, but it would be dangerous for the US to bet exclusively on the President. According to widespread reports²⁶, Musharraf had likely closed a USA-brokered deal with Benazir Bhutto before Bhutto's death, involving a Musharraf-PPP coexistence, in an effort to prevent PPP co-chairman Zardari from leaving Musharraf in the hands of Nawaz Sharif's zealots. But the legacy of that deal will not last forever, and Washington's best bet for the future is probably Zardari himself, given the noteworthy restraint²⁷ shown by the PPP leader with regard to the restoration of those deposed judges who, once restored, will certainly be going for Musharraf's throat. Army Chief Kayani, in the meantime, is observing events with considerable detachment, complying with the civilian government as to diffusing the situation in Swat, and leaving the negotiations in the hands of the civilian administrators.

Taliban leader Faqir Muhammad publicly praised Gilani's overtures last March 29, but he also reiterated that a Pakistan allied to the United States would not be an acceptable interlocutor for the TTP. Things have come a long way since then, and Faqir Muhammad's statement must be interpreted as a rhetorical exercise more than a serious condition. Interviewed by NEFA in April 2008, the *Naib Amir* (deputy leader) of the TTP stated: "Negotiations are successful. We do not want lawlessness in Pakistan. We did not initiate war, it was imposed upon us. We are absolutely satisfied with the ongoing negotiations." At the same time, Faqir Muhammad stated that the TTP was ready to talk about peace and stability in Pakistan, but would certainly continue their operations

²³ "The Haqqani Network and Cross-Border Terrorism in Afghanistan"
<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2374049>

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008%5C03%5C17%5Cstory_17-3-2008_pg1_1

²⁶ "Power-sharing deal in Pakistan said to be imminent"
<http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/10/04/asia/pakistan.php>

²⁷ "Pakistan coalition fails to break judges deadlock"
<http://in.reuters.com/article/globalCoverage1/idINIndia-33503520080509>

across the border in Afghanistan: "Britain, Russia and America have declared war against Afghanistan. It is our Islamic country, the home of the Mujahideen. We will continue full co-operation with the Afghan mujahideen. We consider supporting Afghan mujahideen against America and its allies as our responsibility, in accordance with Islamic Sharia."

The split which occurred in January between Beitullah Mehsud's TTP and Hafez Gul Bahadur is an important political development. Gul Bahadur, who served as the *Naib Amir* of the TTP until January 18, 2008, left the movement to side – at least to some extent – with the government. According to NEFA sources, Bahadur refused to intervene in support of Mehsud when the Pakistani Army launched an operation against Beitullah's Mehsuds in North Waziristan in early January this year²⁸. Bahadur responded to the calls for help by stating harshly that he had had to fight the Army on his own for the last four years, and could not bring himself to cause further trouble for his people for the sake of Beitullah. The disagreement between the two appears to be serious. Bahadur's defection means that sizeable portions of both South and North Waziristan are now in control of pro-government militants: Maulvi Nazir's Taliban in the Wana area in South Waziristan, and Bahadur's group in the portions of North Waziristan mainly inhabited by Wazirs, namely along the borders with Afghanistan and South Waziristan. It must be noted that there is no peace accord between Bahadur and the Pakistan Government, but peace is being maintained in the context of a truce observed by both parties in North Waziristan since November 2007.

Maulvi Nazir and Gul Bahadur represent the kind of Taliban the Government will be willing to deal with, and it is important to remember that both of the "pro-government" leaders have repeatedly sworn allegiance to Mullah Omar, in full accordance with the very peculiar *realpolitik* proposed by Islamabad. In other words, for Islamabad, a good Talib is an Afghan Talib or, at a stretch, a Talib operating in Afghanistan, whatever his nationality or tribal affiliation. In addition, Islamabad would probably be more than happy to resume the pro-Jihadi support role played by the FATA during the anti-Soviet Jihad and later, to a lesser extent, providing support to the Taliban regime. On both occasions, it was Pakistan that dictated strategy and decided operations involving tribal support. With Beitullah Mehsud out of the picture or integrated into the Nazir-Bahadur scheme, Pakistan will once again be the tribes' institutional patron, providing them with support in exchange for obedience. The Pakistani Security Services are probably more successful than we know, in terms of re-establishing the government's writ in the tribal areas. The problem is that the Pakistani security apparatus' idea of law and order in the tribal areas does not necessarily coincide with the international community's views on the matter.

In the accords negotiated since 2006 along the border for example, nothing was ever conceded by the militants with regards to TTP incursions into Afghanistan, or in relation to providing support to Afghan insurgents. The TTP is required not to harbour foreign militants and to respect government infrastructure, but no mention is made about TTP activities in Afghanistan.

There are several elements confirming Islamabad's will to replicate the 1980s scenario in terms of administering an Islamist guerrilla force focused on Afghanistan. If successful, Islamabad would have managed, in the span of five years, to turn a potentially lethal

²⁸ "Pakistani army in onslaught against Taliban chief linked to Bhutto killing"
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jan/25/pakistan.afghanistan>

phenomenon into a proxy army whose primary *raison d'être* are attacking and destabilizing Afghanistan, while maintaining the level of security threat needed in order to perpetuate western funding and military aid. The main obstacle would likely be Beitullah's TTP and their al-Qaida allies who, for the time being, appear to be holding the banner of Jihad, but the fact that the TTP is now ready to negotiate is indicative of a potential evolution in the groups' positions in the near future.

It does make sense that the Pakistanis might be working on the possibility of a long-standing truce at home, coupled with a non-interference clause concerning the group's activities in Afghanistan. This is not only a credible scenario, but a re-enactment of the old PPP policy of "anything goes across the border if Pakistan is left in peace". It should be remembered that the main tenets of the Pakistani Afghan doctrine were refined under Bhutto by advisors who are reportedly still kept in high regard within party circles.

Accordingly, the primary target for the TTP appears to be the Coalition across the border, at least for the time being; as confirmed by Maulvi Omar: "The anti-Muslim forces are on one side, under the name of allies. The Muslims are on the other side, under the name of Jihadis. This decision has been taken in the Quran 1400 years ago, when God said that when anti-Muslim forces fight you collectively, you should also fight them as a group. In this war, Bush and Musharraf are standing on one side with their allies, and on the other side stand Mullah Omar, the Mujahideen and their companions."²⁹

Maulvi Omar is also adamant concerning the present need for negotiation, although Jihad remains a priority for the group, "In the entire world, people fight wars and later reconcile. These two phases always coexist. We have launched armed jihad, which is our most important religious duty but both war and negotiation are part of jihad. War was necessary when we launched our armed struggle in order to defend ourselves, and now the time has arrived to sit around a table and talk for the restoration of peace."

Faqir Mohammed states very similarly, Tribals are a very hospitable people. Tribals know how to respect their guests. In Afghanistan and the tribal areas, the war is in conflict with our traditional hospitality. Throughout the world a war is being fought under the leadership of Sheikh Usama and Amir-ul Momineen Mullah Mohammad Omar. The war against America and its allies has been going on under the leadership of these two personalities. We have stated that if we were given the honor of hosting these guests, it would be a great privilege for us." Usama bin Laden and Mullah Omar are seen as peers, as co-leaders in a global struggle, and there is no fear of openly declaring solidarity and support for them.

Peace Accord, Swat/Malakand

Throughout March and April, the two sides met regularly – officially or otherwise – to work out a comprehensive peace accord affecting Swat and the rest of the former Malakand Division. A six-point agreement was signed³⁰ on April 21 by the provincial government and the Tanzeem-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM, lit. "the movement for the enforcement of Islamic law"), the proto-Taliban group which, together with Beitullah's tribal army, forms the core of the TTP. Following that accord, the TNSM's founder and former leader, Sufi Mohammed, who had been detained since 2002, was

²⁹ NEFA interview with Maulvi Omar, April 2008

³⁰ <http://washingtontimes.com/news/2008/apr/21/pakistan-frees-pro-taliban-leader/>

freed by the authorities. In 2001, Sufi Mohammed had led several thousand Pakistani fighters across the border to fight alongside their Afghan allies against the US-backed Northern Alliance, and was arrested while re-entering Pakistan in November 2001. His military expedition had been, by and large, a complete disaster, with thousands lost as casualties and prisoners.

Sufi Mohammed, Mullah Fazlullah's father-in-law, distanced³¹ himself from the movement's leadership while in jail, after criticizing Fazlullah and Faqir Mohammed, his heir at the helm of the TNSM in Bajaur; however, it is difficult to assess whether the critical statements made by Sufi about his former comrades were induced by his imprisonment, or if they were the result of a sudden change in his position. Sufi Mohammed is reported to have expressed dissatisfaction about the choices made by Faqir Mohammed and Fazlullah during his imprisonment. According to widespread rumours, Sufi had already been transferred³² from jail to a hospital in November 2007, when the Government was trying to halt the conflict in Swat.

It must be noted that Sufi Mohammed had conceived his TNSM in 1989³³, well before the advent of the Taliban as a structured organization. The fusion between the TNSM and the TTP can be explained by the role played by Faqir Muhammad in assuming control of the "tribal" Bajauri wing of the organization and turning it into a Taliban-inspired Mujaheddin outfit. Later, Mullah Fazlullah brought the Malakand/Swat branch of the movement into the TTP fold, transforming the TNSM into the armed militant group that today rules over large swathes of both tribal and settled areas within the old Malakand Division.

With a peace agreement with Sufi Mohammed's group in Swat already inked, the provincial government set out to find a negotiated solution to the dispute with the fighters led by Mullah Fazlullah in Malakand. At the end of April, the insurgents and representatives of the provincial cabinet were still striving for a positive resolution to negotiations. According to NEFA sources, ANP senior minister Bashir Ahmad Bilour is playing a crucial role in the negotiation process, while on the other side a number of tribal elders and representatives of the Taliban are taking part in the negotiations.

The Proliferation of Non-Taliban Islamic Armies in Khyber Agency

One element of interest in the spring of 2008 is the proliferation of Islamist groups not affiliated with the Taliban in Khyber Agency. Lashkar-e-Islam (LI), a relatively well-organized "Islamic army" led by Mangal Bagh, a charismatic, de facto leader without a religious education, who controls approximately three-quarters of the territory in Khyber Agency, and has managed to rally most of the Afridis, the dominant tribe in the Agency, to their banner.

Mangal Bagh took control of Lashkar-e-Islam (LI, lit. "the army of Islam"), a group originally established by the Deobandi cleric Mufti Munir Shakir, approximately two years ago, and initially campaigned for the release of the founder, who had been expelled

³¹ <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1687013-2,00.html>

³² "Pakistan frees militant who fought U.S. in Afghanistan"

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-pakistan22apr22,0,445268.story>

³³ <http://www.dawn.com/2008/04/22/top4.htm>

from Khyber Agency in February 2006 following a violent dispute with a Barelvi rival, Pir Saifur Rehman³⁴.

In the span of those two years, LI has evolved into a tribe-based militant outfit which has successfully wrested control of the area from criminal networks and the central government, although LI now seems to entertain a decent relationship with the latter, after a difficult confrontation in June 2007³⁵. Mangal Bagh's law-and-order recipe was popular with the conservative population of Khyber Agency, and the tribal leader is often represented as a "good Islamist", a partisan of law and order who does not oppose the central government, but "fills in the gaps" left by the authorities. LI seems to fill in the gaps left by the Taliban in the FATA, administering Khyber Agency with a low-intensity version of Sharia law, enough to steal the show from the Taliban, who might have established themselves in the Agency on the basis of a very similar agenda. It might be called a pre-emptive Islamic revolution; an immunization programme of sorts delivered by a populist-sounding, relatively inoffensive tribal pin-up.

In April, Mangal Bagh elucidated his programme to NEFA, "Today, every single person of the Agency who is involved in the liquor business, gambling, kidnapping for ransom or is selling narcotics, or is involved in any other activity that can be a threat to the area or to the country, is our enemy. Our manifesto is to bar these people from wrongdoings and to make people of this area and the country pious." This is a program that sounds nearly identical to what the Taliban is preaching in Waziristan, even as we write; surprisingly, however, when questioned on his relationship with the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, Mangal Bagh is absolutely adamant, "We don't have any relationship with them. They have their own aims and objectives, and LI has its own manifesto." On the Frontier Corps' role, Mangal Bagh commented, "These khasadars and Frontier Corps men are our brothers. We don't want our country to be disgraced and weakened. So we would never choose to clash with our own officers."³⁶

On the other hand, in relation to the Bhutto assassination, Mangal Bagh's position is extremely similar to what the radical Islamists preach. Every pious Muslim [benefited from Bhutto's death]. Because our Prophet (peace be upon him) said that those under the rule of a woman would better be underneath the earth than above it. Therefore, I believe that her death was a blessing for all Muslims, who were saved from being under the rule of a woman."

During the first half of April 2008, LI confronted the Kokhikhel sub-tribe inhabiting the Jamrud area; a substantial portion of territory adjacent to Peshawar's suburbs. He attempted to take over Jamrud on April 15, but failed to break through the Kokhikhel lines³⁷, and after 24 hours of intense clashes, the Frontier Corps were forced to intervene in order to separate the warring factions. The Jamrud area includes the notorious Smugglers' Bazaar which is divided into a settled and a tribal sector, and the area is well-known for the sale of narcotics and smuggled alcoholic beverages. According to reliable sources, LI will probably attempt to take Jamrud again as soon as the situation appears

³⁴ "Mufti Shakir agrees to leave Bara" <http://www.dawn.com/2006/02/28/nat3.htm>

³⁵ In June 2007, Mangal Bagh's house was demolished by the Government as a punishment for his involvement in support of Mufti Shakir. See: <http://www.pakspectator.com/profile-of-mangal-bagh/>

³⁶ NEFA Interview, April 2008

³⁷ "Tribe seeks action against LI"

http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/print.asp?page=2008%5C04%5C15%5Cstory_15-4-2008_pg7_47

favorable for an offensive but, for the time being, the warring factions have retreated to their previous positions, with LI apparently controlling over three-quarters of the Khyber Agency's territory. Elsewhere in the Agency, a similar but adverse opposing outfit called Ansar ul Islam controls a significant part of the remote Tirah Valley.

Also in the agency is Haji Namdar, a radical cleric who returned to his native Khyber Agency in 2002 after a decade spent working in Saudi Arabia, where he was influenced by the Kingdom's strict Wahhabi doctrine. Namdar has repeatedly stated that he came back to Khyber following a premonitory dream, recalling Mullah Omar's well-known fondness for dreams and their interpretation. Namdar's similarity with the Taliban is, however, not limited to dreams, beginning with the Taliban-like name of his group, the Society for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, an outfit active from 2002 and known for addressing law-and-order issues as well as for obliging men to attend mosque and wear a beard. Namdar is even known to have hosted Ustad Yasir, a prominent Afghan Taliban ideologue, after the latter was released in exchange for a kidnapped Italian reporter in March 2007³⁸.

Namdar had entertained a cordial relationship with the TTP until late April, when he interfered to obtain the release³⁹ of eight Frontier Corps men kidnapped by Beitullah Mehsud's men. The TTP did not apparently appreciate Namdar's intervention, and on May 1, a suicide operative blew himself up inside Namdar's Head Quarters. The cleric escaped unhurt, in what was the first suicide attack in Khyber Agency. Interviewed by NEFA the day after the attempt on his life, Namdar made clear his position on the TTP, "Certainly we gave them shelter, thinking that they were mujahideen fighting against the enemies of Islam. There are still people who work towards this just cause, and we will continue to support them however we can, but these are certainly not the TTP. And after we came to know of the intentions of the TTP, we expelled them from the area and severed our contacts with them... They want to establish a state. They aim to establish a state of their own in the tribal areas of Pakistan and are involved in most of the suicide attacks carried out in the country."⁴⁰ And Namdar elucidates his position towards the Government, "During the last more than five years of our movement, we did not opt for conflict with the government agencies, and our relations with the government are good. At times there were excesses but we did not react. We don't want to fight, even if they do."

A TTP commander linked to Baitullah and Hakimullah) claimed responsibility for the suicide attack⁴¹. According to the media, Namdar had asked Hakimullah, who was appointed TTP leader for Orakzai and Khyber by Beitullah, to leave the Bara area following the liberation of the Frontier Corps hostages. The TTP reacted by dispatching a 15-year-old suicide operative to blow up the group's Head Quarters.

Namdar represents a strand of radical Islam similar to the ideology of the Taliban, although he is probably more oriented toward Wahabism than toward the radical interpretation of the Deobandi doctrine that inspires the Taliban. However, the emergence and proliferation of these radical groups which are not affiliated with the

³⁸ Anonymous NEFA sources

³⁹ "17 injured in mosque suicide attack" <http://www.dawn.com/2008/05/02/top3.htm>

⁴⁰ NEFA Interview, April 2008

⁴¹ "17 injured in mosque suicide attack" <http://www.dawn.com/2008/05/02/top3.htm> and NEFA Interview, April 2008

Taliban should be investigated further to assess the scope and potential of radical Islamism in the area, while at same time trying to understand if, in the case of Khyber Agency at least, the phenomenon is somehow encouraged by external players.

According to media sources⁴², the Pakistan Government has no objection to groups that advocate law and order in the tribal areas, provided they don't attempt to take over control of the territory, which by and large in most of FATA has already changed hands. It is a fact that the Pakistani security apparatus did not seem very concerned by the proliferation of armed Islamic militancy in Khyber Agency until June 29th, when the Gilani cabinet ordered its first ever military operation in the FATAs⁴³. Frontier Corps paramilitary forces entered Khyber Agency and moved against Mangal Bagh's main bases in the Bara area. The military offensive however, although a symptomatic show of force, did not appear to be aimed to rid the Agency of Lashkar-e-Islam but simply to push Mangal Bagh's forces back and away from Peshawar's gates. The most significant factor of the Army offensive against Mangal Bagh however, was certainly Baitullah's hurried and very public response in support of a warlord who had openly refused to join hands with the TTP. On June 29th, while the Frontier Corps were pushing towards Bara, Maulvi Omar released a statement on behalf of Baitullah Mehsud announcing the immediate interruption of peace negotiation in Waziristan, in protest against the Army offensive in Khyber. Mangal Bagh's main ally in the area, Haji Namdar, was also involved in the clashes and one of his bases was hit by a missile allegedly fired from Afghanistan⁴⁴ on June 30th. Interestingly, TTP main spokesman and heavyweight Maulvi Omar was apparently staying in the same compound.

The reasons behind Baitullah's swift response are not clear but it may be read as an attempt to 'absorb' LI within the TTP on the basis of the support provided at the time of need. From a strategic point of view, Khyber is incredibly significant and both Islamabad and the insurgents are clearly bracing for a confrontation that will hopefully remain a diplomatic endeavor. For the time being nevertheless, the parts seem intentioned to negotiate and military operations were interrupted on July 4th and a peace jirga was being arranged to discuss the issue.

Whether LI and Haji Namdar will eventually join forces with the TTP remains to be seen but according to NEFA sources, Namdar retracted some of the statements he had made against the TTP and high profile meetings between the latter and TTP Mohmand leader Umar Khalid had reportedly followed the interruption of the military offensive.

Conclusion

The Pakistan government is dealing with a substantial insurgency in North Waziristan, led by Beitullah Mehsud, who also leads the militants in Bajaur, where a truce has been in place for months, and Swat, where negotiations have reached an advanced stage. In addition, the federal government can rely on two unofficial accords currently in effect with Maulvi Nazir's "pro-Government" Taliban, and with Hafez Gul Bahadur's group in North Waziristan.

⁴² "Vice-and-virtue battle in Khyber valley" http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3597478.stm

⁴³ "Pakistani Army attacks warlord's bases"
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jun/30/pakistan>

⁴⁴ "Maulvi Omar escapes Bara blast"
http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008%5C07%5C01%5Cstory_1-7-2008_pg1_3

It is undeniable that the conflict has been quelled in most of the tribal areas and in Swat, but nothing guarantees that we are not just witnessing a temporary lull useful to the TTP and affiliated groups to reform, rearm, and reorganize themselves. The accords inked in 2006 in North Waziristan and Bajaur were later criticized for having provided the insurgents with the opportunity to reorganize after years of continuous clashes; in fact, 2007 witnessed the evolution of a tribal insurgency into an all-out civil conflict.

Exactly one month after the peace deal between the authorities and Sufi Mohammed's TNSM was signed, Taliban militants operating under the command of Maulana Fazlullah in Swat and Malakand signed a 16-point peace agreement with the ANP-led NWFP government and agreed, at least officially, to disband their militias. The accord also denounced suicide operations and attacks on security forces and government installations.

The document establishes an 11-member joint committee to ensure the implementation of the agreement. The members of the committee include Wajid Ali Khan, Dr Shamshir Ali, MPA (Member of Provincial Assembly), DIG Malakand Range, district police officer Swat, and district coordination officer Swat on behalf of the Provincial Government, and Maulana Muhammad Amin, Ali Bakht, Muslim Khan, Mehmood Khan, and Nisar Khan representing the Taliban⁴⁵.

The Swat peace accord is probably the most complete in scope and the best suited to give an idea of what, exactly, the Taliban and the Provincial Government obtained, and of what they had to relinquish for the sake of peace. The Taliban will be allowed to operate their own radio station, they will be allowed to call themselves Taliban, and Sharia will be implemented in the areas affected by the accord. All Taliban prisoners will see their cases reviewed; the Army will be gradually withdrawn and sent back to their barracks; the Government will compensate damages to the property of private citizens during the fighting; and the Taliban even get to play an important role in the administration of an Islamic University to be established in erstwhile Malakand Division.

On the other hand, the Taliban agreed to accept the authority of the Government; collaborate in the resolution of murder inquiries and other legal cases; they will not oppose vaccination against polio, measles, smallpox, and tuberculosis, including all those administered to children; and they will not obstruct women's education. The insurgents also promise not to condemn other citizens' religious attitudes, and to avoid enrolling in private militias.

Carefully considered, there are no earth-shattering concessions by the Taliban, they simply promise to re-engage with civil society, and they certainly obtained more than they conceded. The most critical political issue, the harboring of foreign militants, is interestingly consigned to Article 7, together with a ban on attacks on barber shops, *"Art 7 - All foreign militants would be handed over to the government besides an assurance from the militants that they would not attack barber shops and markets visited by women"*.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ NEFA sources in Swat

⁴⁶ NEFA sources, see Appendix 1

Similar to the 2006 accords in North Waziristan and Bajaur, the Taliban have essentially been given legitimacy, although not as an armed movement. On the other hand, there is no control mechanism, apart from the 11-member committee, to ensure that weapons are handed over and foreign militants ejected from their territory. If it is true that both parties made concessions, it must be observed that the ones that really affect the scenario along the border concern the government and the government only. For example, Taliban prisoners will by and large be freed, and this will mean injecting the district with vengeful militants ready to take their place among the Mujahideen.

Ultimately, the government is not negotiating the dismantling of the TTP, but the retargeting of the organization toward Afghanistan. In other words, from Islamabad's point of view, if the tribal context cannot be stabilized once and for all, at least they want to have a say concerning when and where to strike across the border. Tribal frontier armies have often been used as a foreign policy tool, and that is probably one of the reasons why they managed to keep their historical autonomy.

Realistically, with India becoming closer and closer to the Afghan regime financially and politically, why should Islamabad forsake one of its best assets in the Afghan scenario without trying to turn the situation to its strategic advantage? The TTP could be a proxy army engaged in support for the Afghan Taliban when necessary, an arrangement which would entail exceptional leverage on the Taliban leadership, with a third party doing the dirty work - plausible deniability at its very best. And the actor here does not necessarily need to be the federal government itself. This role "in defense" of Pakistan is certainly clear to Faqir Mohammed: "We will continue our activities until we achieve the purpose for which Pakistan was created. In Afghanistan and other Islamic countries, a war is going on against the cruelty of America and its allies. Until and unless America and its allies are expelled, Mujahideen activities will continue."

Appendix I

SWAT Peace Accord, signed on May 21, 2008

1-To accept and honour the writ of the federal and provincial governments

2-Shariat-e-Muhammadi would be implemented in erstwhile Malakand Division in letter and spirit.

3-The militants would not malign religions of other citizens.

4-The cases of the (Taliban) prisoners would be reviewed and a decision about their release would be made.

5-The government is assured that its law enforcement agencies, government officials, buildings and installations, police stations, police officials, Police Lines, Army, Frontier Corps, Frontier Constabulary, bridges, roads and electricity installations would not be attacked. There would be a ban on keeping private militia. The Taliban would denounce and disown suicide attacks, remote-controlled bomb blasts and bomb blasts in all private, government buildings and shops.

6-The Army would be gradually sent back to barracks in accordance with the prevailing situation.

7-All foreign militants would be handed over to the government besides an assurance from the militants that they would not attack barber shops and markets visited by women.

8-The government would look into all damages done during the operations and would compensate all deserving victims.

9-The Taliban would not oppose vaccination against polio, measles, smallpox and TB, including all those administered to children, and would not obstruct women's education.

10-There would be complete ban on the display of weapons and only licensed arms would be allowed.

11-The incidents of kidnapping and car-lifting must be condemned and subsequently eliminated and all those training centres where militants and suicide bombers were being trained would be dismantled besides those places where explosives were being made.

12-In line with the rules of the authorised license, there would be permission to talk on FM radio channel.

13-The local Taliban would cooperate with the government in the investigations of incidents of murders, robbery and other crimes.

14-The government would take action in the area against oppressors, bribe-takers, adulterers, thieves, dacoits and kidnappers in order to rid the society of such elements.

15-An Islamic university would be set up in Mamdheri Complex, which would be run by a joint government-Taliban committee.

In the last and the 16th point, an 11-member joint committee was named to ensure the implementation of the agreement. The members of the committee included Wajid Ali Khan, MPA Dr Shamshir Ali, DIG Malakand Range, district police officer Swat, district coordination officer Swat from the government side and Maulana Muhammad Amin, Ali Bakht, Muslim Khan, Mehmood Khan and Nisar Khan from the Taliban side.