



Developments in the Jihadi Resurgence in Pakistan: January 2008

March 5, 2008

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I. Background

In the turbulent country of Pakistan, 2008 began with a month punctuated by four suicide attacks in the first 20 days, as the insurgents have once again demonstrated their operational capability to strike beyond the traditionally restive Tribal Areas of North Western Pakistan. According to Pakistani authorities, between late December and the first week of January, at least 13 suicide bombers were dispatched in major cities.¹ Moreover, militants reportedly created a new umbrella group called the al Ouds Army. Terrorist attacks killed 38 and injured over a hundred in Lahore, Peshawar, Swat, and Mohmand Agency (FATA). Five potential suicide bombers were also arrested en route to their target in Sargodha, Punjab. Urban areas suffered two suicide attacks, in Lahore in and Peshawar, and minor incidents were registered throughout the country. Swat and the southern tribal agencies, however, witnessed most of the fighting in the first month of the year.

The Shiite holy month of Muharram presented January's principal risk factor, and the January 17 suicide attack on a Shiite mosque in Peshawar² confirms that sectarian groups are still active in the country, although their operational scope might have been diminished, or their fire power voluntarily re-directed, by the ongoing conflict against government forces in Pakistan and against the NATO-led coalition supporting the Afghan National Army across the border in Afghanistan.

The limited extent of attacks claimed by sectarian outfits during this year's Shiite festivities should not, however, signify that radical Sunni extremists in Pakistan are unaffected by sectarian tendencies, as both the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and al Qa'ida-inspired groups are holding staunch anti-Shiite stances in Pakistan – and may have absorbed part of the sectarian outfits' manpower and logistical network. The suicide attack that killed 12 in Peshawar and the sectarian clashes in Hangu and Kurram are a reminder that sectarian violence has deep roots among the country's Sunni extremists.

¹ <http://www.dawn.com/2008/01/20/nat28.htm>

² Salman Masood, 12 Killed in Suicide Bombing at Shiite Mosque in Pakistan, New York Times, 18 January 2008.

Tension arising out of sectarian clashes in Kurram Agency have significantly deescalated following a ceasefire brokered through a reconciliatory Jirga on January 3. The Parachinar area bordering Afghanistan, dubbed mini-Iran by locals, is traditionally inhabited by a large Shiite minority, and 900 families have fled towards the Afghan provinces of Paktiya and Khost.³ A curfew proclaimed in November 2007 was lifted by the government as a sign of respect for the Muharram festivities.

On the same note, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, the terrorist outfit founded by Riaz Basra in 1996 and widely regarded as the most vicious among sectarian groups in Pakistan, has resurfaced during the 10-day Ashura festival, the culmination of Shiite festivities commemorating Imam Hussein's martyrdom in Karbala in 680 AD. Sindh Home Secretary, Ghulam Mohtarram, warned about alleged renewed activity of the sectarian militia even if it allegedly operates fragmented into several sub-groupings. His warning should probably be solely related to the Muharram timeframe and doesn't constitute reason for exceptional alarm.⁴

According to the Combined Task Force – 82, Darim Sedgai, an important commander of the Haqqani network, was killed in Pakistan on January 16, dealing another blow to the group run by Siraj Haqqani, son and heir of prominent Taliban commander Jalaluddin who, according to NEFA sources, died of natural causes in September 2007. Coalition and Afghan Forces had killed commanders Sangeen and Abdul Mana'an, two major Haqqani field commanders, in October and December 2007 respectively. Sedgai was well-known for facilitating the cross-border transit of IED devices and suicide bombers into Afghanistan, and he had been named as one of those responsible for planning the January 2008 Serena Hotel attack in Kabul.⁵

In an unrelated development, the Pakistani press reported on January 2 that Younas Mehsud, one of Baitullah Mehsud's most significant commanders, was arrested in Karachi and was being interrogated at an undisclosed location.⁶ Younas Mehsud's arrest confirms a TTP presence in the capital of Sindh Province.

Throughout January, South Waziristan has witnessed heavy clashes between militants linked to the TTP and primarily members of the Mehsud tribe and the Pakistani Army. The Pakistani army was forced to send in heavy armoury to retake positions, including forts, which were overrun by militants. On January 28, the spokesman of the Afghan Taliban, Zabiullah Mujahid, distanced his organization from the TTP led by Baitullah Mehsud. He said: "we do not support any militant activity and operation in Pakistan. Baitullah is a Pakistan and we as the Afghan Taliban have nothing to do with his appointment or his expulsion. We did not appoint him and we have not expelled him."⁷ Within a few days, Baitullah Mehsud started to make overtures to Pakistani authorities to negotiate a ceasefire.

In North Waziristan on the other hand, militants and government have engaged in repeated rounds of negotiations aimed at reviving the North Waziristan peace accord of 2006. Substantial progress had been made towards a truce at the time of writing.

The situation in Swat, however, has evolved into a full blown insurgency, with the Pakistani Army engaging the militants in several areas which had been unstable since the onset of the insurgency in November 2007. Several foreigners fighting alongside local insurgents were arrested in Loe Namal and spotted in the Winai Bridge area.⁸ The government regained control of several valleys and pushed the militants

³ <http://nation.com.pk/daily/jan-2008/5/index15.php>

⁴ http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008%5C01%5C04%5Cstory_4-1-2008_pg12_4

⁵ <http://cjtf-a.com/index.php/Press-Releases/Coalition-forces-confirm-Darim-Sedgai-death.html>

⁶ http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008\01\22\story_22-1-2008_pg1_4

⁷ <http://www.dawn.com/2008/01/29/top18.htm>

⁸ <http://www.dawn.com/2008/01/20/top8.htm>

towards the mountainous areas of Kabal and Piochar, making ample use of heavy artillery and attack helicopters. Approximately 300 insurgents have been killed since November 2007 but the TTP-backed militants vow to continue operations throughout the electoral period if the Army does not abandon the area.

A suicide bomber injured 10 in the first half of January and two potential bombers were arrested on the 18th and 21st. According to a report⁹ released by the Pakistani government in late January, 292 people – 195 officials from the army, the Frontier Constabulary, and police, and 97 civilians – have been killed between January 1, 2007 and January 23, 2008, slightly longer than a year, but we should keep in mind that the Swat insurgency started only in November 2007.¹⁰ According to the same report, the militants maintain 4 major hideouts, Kabal, Mingora, Matta, and Khawanza Kholā, and 14 minor hideouts in Swat; Kabal, and Matta which have witnessed heavy artillery bombardments and intense operations by the Army during the month of January.

Several high-profile commanders close to Mullah Fazlullah, the fundamentalist leader with a penchant for pirate radio transmissions, were arrested in January 2008. According to NEFA sources, the banned militants' Radio channel continued to broadcast Fazlullah's speeches at regular intervals throughout the month of January.

II. Overview

a.) Orakzai, Darra Adam Khel, and Kohat

Fighting has continued throughout January in Orakzai, the Tribal Agency bordering the traditionally more stable Khyber Agency, whose administrative centre is the Provincial capital Peshawar. The insurgents had taken control of the Darra Adam Khel corridor, between Orakzai and Khyber Agencies, earlier in the year and January seemed to have been a critical month for the balance of power in the area. After repeated clashes between TTP militias and government forces, the Frontier Constabulary troops, heavily reinforced from Peshawar and Kohat, managed to retake control of the Dosti Tunnel and Darra Adam Khel and neighbouring Kohat district, just inside the settled areas. The Darra Adam Khel area is of critical importance for its proximity to the provincial capital and is allegedly a hub for extremist and sectarian organizations such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, which has maintained a presence in the area for the last three years. Darra Adam Khel is well-known for being the location of tribal, family-based weapon factories, where weapons and ammunition were built for smuggling purposes. The Taliban had allegedly reconverted the production for military use and curbed heavily the smuggling of drugs and weapons.

The northern Orakzai Agency is particularly important from a strategic point of view as it is situated between Peshawar – where the Pakistani Army can rely on a heavy presence – and the southern agencies, where militants have been more active since the insurgency began in February 2003. In particular, the Dosti Tunnel (or Pak-Japanese Friendship Tunnel) is vital for the transit of supplies towards the Army outposts in the southern section of the tribal belt. After weeks of regular clashes and several casualties among both Army and insurgents, the Pakistani Army has finally cleared the area on January 28th after attempts by the militants to blow up the tunnel with a truck laden with explosives. Notwithstanding the advance of the Pakistani Army, the local Taliban have deep roots in the area and have certainly not been defeated. According to locals who

⁹ http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008\02\03\story_3-2-2008_pg1_2

¹⁰ http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008\02\03\story_3-2-2008_pg1_2

have witnessed the unfolding of the operation, they have withdrawn to the mountainous areas along the border but may re-emerge soon unscathed.

In general terms, the government knows that by holding the Dosti Tunnel, they prevent any substantial infiltration of insurgents from the south towards the provincial capital and from the Waziristan area to the other high-intensity frontline in Swat, and Islamabad is doing its utmost to keep the tunnel area free of insurgents.

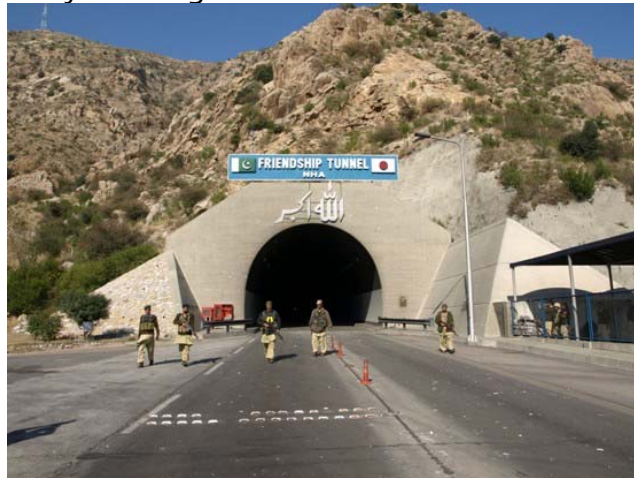
b.) Tank and Bannu

Tank and Bannu continued to suffer from a spill-over effect whenever heavy operations were carried out in the bordering tribal agencies of South and North Waziristan. Militants linked to the TTP also attacked military outposts in localities bordering the tribal areas, firing rockets or mortars towards the settled districts. The presence of Uzbek militias, linked to both the TTP and al Qa'ida, must also be registered in Tank district, where they were spotted fighting alongside Pakistani militants. Most of the insurgents' attacks were registered in the first half of the month, with an apex around January 12th and 13th, in coincidence with intense military operations in South Waziristan; a state of relative stability ensued after the 18th.

In an operation which bears a certain resemblance to the Beslan, mass kidnapping carried out by Chechen militants in Russia in 2004, TTP militiamen took hostage dozens of children in Bannu on January 28 but freed them after intense negotiations with tribal elders.¹¹

c.) South Waziristan

In January, South Waziristan saw most of the military activity in the Pakistani Tribal Areas, with repeated clashes affecting large swathes of the Agency, in particular those areas inhabited by the Mehsud tribesmen loyal to Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leader Baitullah Mehsud. The militants – with a significant participation of Uzbek militias linked to al Qa'ida – have regularly attacked government positions since January 1, when Mehsud's Mujahidin kidnapped four paramilitary soldiers of the Frontier Corps (FC). The government responded by pounding the Tiarza area with aerial bombings.



Images released by the Pakistani military of operations in the Dosti "Friendship" tunnel in Orakzai

¹¹ <http://www.thefrontierpost.com/News.aspx?ncat=ts&nid=708>; <http://www.nation.com.pk/daily/jan-2008/29/index1.php>; <http://www.dawn.com/2008/01/29/top1.htm>

In early January, Ghazi Ahmed, a TTP spokesman, confirmed the existence of a unique, although fragmented, frontline extending from Swat to South Waziristan when he gave a seven-day ultimatum to the government to end all military operations in Swat. Fighters from South Waziristan have allegedly been actively supporting the insurgents in Swat since October 2007, in particular sending experienced fighters to hold the frontline during the Army advance in Shangla, in late November last year.

For the first time, on January 23, APC's and MBT's entered the theatre of operations in South Waziristan against Baitullah Mehsud's Taliban, more specifically in the Makin, Spinkai Raghzai, and Tiarza areas.¹² Aerial bombings and attack helicopters have also been employed repeatedly by the Pakistani military.

The clashes opposing Mehsud's TTP and their foreign jihadi and al Qa'ida allies to the (pro-government) Ahmadzai Wazirs led by Maulvi Nazir continued to steal the headlines in mainland Pakistan. On January 8, Maulvi Nazir, who appears to actively support the government stances in the southern FATAs, "requested" all Mehsud tribesmen in Ahmadzai territory leave the area within a day. Nazir's statement came in response to an attack to his offices in Wana and Shakai. The attackers were allegedly led by Uzbek fighters, whose forces were decimated by Nazir's militiamen in April 2007 and have since provided firepower to the Mehsud-backed TTP.¹³

In other words, the internecine battle in the FATAs has assumed the semblance of what it really was since the onset of the confrontation: a tribal war motivated by tribal dynamics in a tribal context. The ongoing international struggle against terrorism has spilled over into the FATAs, lending a reason for the Ahmadzai to oppose the Mehsuds on their territory. In the last 2 years, in fact,



Images released by the Pakistani military of recent arms caches seized in South Waziristan, including (at bottom) suicide bomb vests

¹² <http://www.dawn.com/2008/01/24/top1.htm>

¹³ <http://www.dawn.com/2007/04/03/top1.htm>; <http://www.dawn.com/2007/04/05/top1.htm>;
<http://www.dawn.com/2007/04/06/top10.htm>

Baitullah Mehsud has held sway over most of South Waziristan, thus igniting the Ahmadzai tribesmen and pushing them into the arms of the federal government. Tribal dynamics are based on conflict as a socio-political process and conflict is always part of the Pashtun (tribal) discourse, be it conflict among brothers, cousins, clans, or tribes. Western analysts should never forget that the ongoing conflict is just an extension of the centuries-old tribal dynamics and third-party power-brokers have often played a part in tribal politics, although Kabul, and not Islamabad, was the traditional partner of one of the other factions.

Accordingly, the Ahmadzai Wazirs held a Jirga on the 9th and 10th and despite an agreement to engage in peace talks with the Mehsuds, the Ahmadzai raised a tribal militia and prepared for battle led by Maulvi Nazir. Nazir, a former Hizb-e-Islami and Taliban commander and a dual Pak-Afghan national, was supported by Pakistan while opposing the Ahmadzai Wazirs' traditional leading sub-tribe, Nek Mohammed's Zalikhel (Nek Mohammed belonged to the dominant Yargulkhel clan of the Zalikhel sub-tribe.)¹⁴ Once again, the war on terror and tribal politics merge into one single, extremely complex problem with Maulvi Nazir on one side and Haji Omar, Nek Mohammed's brother and one of Mehsud top commanders, on the other.

In general, the TTP proved themselves to be both capable and willing to engage in an intense conflict when they overran two government forts in the first half of the month, leaving 22 soldiers dead or missing. The militants also refused to hand over six kidnapped soldiers to a delegation of 80 Mehsud tribesmen, demonstrating that the TTP is strong enough in South Waziristan to oppose an initiative of the tribe's own elders.

With the end of January approaching, the government sent substantial reinforcements towards the Ladha Fort area, including MBT's and heavy artillery and the militants suffered substantial losses as a result of Army initiative. This resulted in renewed peace talks between the Interior Ministry and Baitullah Mehsud's TTP. There is a possibility that Mehsud might have accepted the talks just in order to regroup or defer heavy bombardments on his positions, but well-informed sources in Khost Province, Afghanistan, have told NEFA that the Afghan Taliban led by Mullah Omar have tried to focus the movement towards Afghanistan, rather than Pakistan.

NEFA sources also describe Mehsud as being isolated following rumours about Mullah Omar firing him as TTP leader. Faqir Muhammad, a Bajauri commander who serves as Baitullah's deputy and is close to al Qa'ida, was apparently offered the position but refused it out of loyalty to Mehsud. This might have pushed the Taliban leadership to revise their position, softening their stance on the 'sacking' of Baitullah while taking distance from the TTP in general terms: accordingly in fact, Zabiullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesman, declared that Omar does not have authority over the Pakistani arm of the movement and was not, therefore, in position to sack the Mehsud leader.¹⁵ Mujahid added that the Taliban is an Afghan movement and they do not support militant activity or operations in Pakistan.

The end of January seems to have brought the need for the Afghan Taliban to take sides in relation to the ongoing conflict in neighbouring Pakistan, as Taliban leaders know very well that supporting the TTP in the FATAs and Swat would certainly cause a fracture between them and their supporters in Islamabad. The message to Mullah Omar and colleagues seems to have been clear and decisive: the fact that "anything goes" in

¹⁴ Nek Mohammed was the first recognized leader of the pro-Taliban tribal insurgents when the movement emerged in South Waziristan in 2003. He was killed by a missile attack in 2004. In 2006, PBS reported that Nek Mohammed had in fact been killed by a missile fired by an American Predator UAV.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3819871.stm;

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/taliban/militants/mohammed.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.dawn.com/2008/01/29/top18.htm>

Afghanistan does not mean that the same applies to Pakistan. In other words, Islamic revolutions are an acceptable scenario in Afghanistan but the Durand line, and not the theoretical borders of the Pashtun nation, i.e. the Indus River well within Pakistan's settled areas, and not too far away from Islamabad – must be where insurgents turn around and head back. Pakistan cannot afford to lose the FATA and if a state of near anarchy is acceptable to the federal government, a fully-fledged, neo-fundamentalist revolution is not and will not be considered a viable option.

d.) North Waziristan

In North Waziristan, the tribes and the government have been working steadily towards a peace accord throughout January. Militants extended a ceasefire they had announced in late December 2007 and the government released seven tribesmen “as a sign of good will”. The Pakistani press announced in late January that the government was already lifting check posts from several of the Agency's hotspots.¹⁶ Clashes have continued sporadically with a peak between mid January and January the 20th, when militants announced they were extending the December 2007 ceasefire.

The Pakistani government had struck a controversial deal with the militants in September 2006, when they literally handed over the Agency to the local Taliban in exchange for their cooperation against foreign militants.¹⁷ The deal was eventually broken during the Lal Masjid siege in the summer 2007. The Government has apparently brokered back door talks through the head of the Madakhel Wazirs, a strategically critical sub-tribe, as their territory spans both side of the Touchi River, thus controlling access to and from Afghanistan.

NEFA sources in the border region reveal that, often, the traditional tribal structure is often replaced by a strict observance of Sharia Law in a Deobandi, neo-fundamentalist sense. In other terms, the younger generations appear to have been deeply affected by the radical clerics active in the area throughout the last two decades and this may be one of the reasons why tribal deals brokered by the government do not seem to hold over time, as tribes and sub-tribes loyal to Mujahidin/jihadi commanders don't consider the deals as binding nor the negotiations as meaningful. This is reportedly happening among both the Wazirs, the Dawars, and the Mehsud Wazirs, and, with some exceptions, the Ahmadzai Wazirs of South Waziristan.

Hafiz Gul Bahadur seems to remain the most prominent militant leader in the Agency and he appeared to support the negotiations. Gul Bahadur's proximity to the TTP leadership - he is one of the two deputy emirs with Bajaur's Faqir Muhammad - led analysts to speculate that the North Waziristan accord would only offer an escape route to Mehsud's men under pressure in South Waziristan.

e.) Mohmand Agency

Mohmand has traditionally been a peaceful Agency by tribal standards and has been known as the more stable among the seven Federally Administered Tribal Agencies together with neighbouring Khyber Agency. Mohmand's position, however, is strategically crucial and TTP militants have been trying to penetrate the area for the last two years with varying degrees of success. Since the onset of the FATA crisis in early 2003, analysts in Peshawar maintained that until Mohmand and Khyber were kept insurgent-free, Peshawar wouldn't really risk anything in terms of security. Accordingly,

¹⁶ <http://www.dawn.com/2008/01/29/top2.htm>

¹⁷ <http://www.dawn.com/2006/09/06/top2.htm>

in the last two years, security has deteriorated in Peshawar, while a fundamentalist, Taliban-inspired brand of Islam made its way into Mohmand and Khyber agencies.

In January, seven FC soldiers were killed near Qandharo while driving towards the military HQ in Ghalanai and “minor” clashes continued in the Agency throughout the first month of the year.¹⁸ Qandharo is the hometown of the Agency’s most prominent TTP commander, Omar Khalid, an important ally of Baitullah Mehsud and a member of the Safi, a powerful tribe spanning both sides of the border and controlling several access points to Afghanistan.

According to NEFA sources, the long border with Afghanistan is the main attraction for militants in Mohmand, together with the Agency proximity to the NWFP provincial capital, Peshawar. Besides, Mohmand borders Bajaur on the North and the Charsadda and Malakand areas, two well-known TTP bastions, to the West/North-West. In other words, Mohmand is critical for the insurgents in order to give a regional dimension to the conflict and guarantee access to the Peshawar area. Also, the Agency is crucial to control the border with the Afghan Kunar Province and the most unstable areas in Nangarhar, and provides access to the Malakand area, which is a Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) stronghold bordering Swat.

f.) **Bajaur**

January in Bajaur was characterized by low-intensity activity on the militants’ side with the Government also refraining from major operations in the area. In general however, Bajaur remains one of the Agencies where the militants can rely on a wider support network and safe escape routes towards Taliban-controlled areas of Kunar Province. In September 2006, Bajaur and North Waziristan were handed over to the tribes in accordance with a comprehensive peace accord between the government and the militants. The accord was instrumental for the TTP in order to regroup and establish itself as a key player in the northern FATAs.

Faqir Muhammad, one of the TTP overall deputies, is certainly the area’s most significant commander. A long-time al Qa’ida-ally who fought in Afghanistan alongside foreign fighters, Faqir Muhammad first received media attention when his house was raided in winter 2005. According to the Pakistani authorities, the compound served as al Qa’ida’s winter HQ and al Qa’ida’s #2, Ayman al Zawahiri, was allegedly hiding there.¹⁹

Bajaur may have been affected by the advanced negotiations in neighbouring North Waziristan, but the area remains among the most volatile in the country and al Qa’ida has certainly maintained a presence there for years. Well-informed observers suggest that when militants refrain from activities in a given sector of the FATAs, this may be an indication of high-profile targets hiding in the area. (Or, heavy activities in a given Agency indicate the TTP will concentrate the government’s attention on areas other than those where high-profile targets would be hiding at a given time.) If this were true, Bajaur and North Waziristan would certainly be the location of choice of high-profile terrorist targets at the moment.

¹⁸ http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/JA30Df03.html

¹⁹ <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2369893>