

THE FATA CONFLICT AFTER SOUTH WAZIRISTAN

PAKISTAN'S WAR AGAINST MILITANTS
CONTINUES IN ORAKZAI, KURRAM,
BAJAUR, AND NORTH WAZIRISTAN

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Introduction

The Pakistani military launched its much-anticipated operation against the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in the Mehsud tribal areas of South Waziristan agency on October 17, 2009. The initial phase of the operation, codenamed Rah-e-Nijat (Path to Deliverance), reached completion ahead of schedule. Since the end of November, violence in the area once heralded as the epicenter of terror in Pakistan has been sporadic and limited. Military activity elsewhere in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), however, has significantly increased.

Even as TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud was dying from wounds sustained in a January drone strike, Pakistani forces were conducting military operations in Orakzai, Kurram, and Bajaur agencies of the FATA. They have also been unusually active in North Waziristan, the Afghan Taliban and al Qaeda stronghold. All four of these areas lie close to Afghanistan in Pakistan's northwest.

The key to understanding the military's actions in the northwestern tribal areas throughout 2009 and into 2010 is that the Pakistani government and military leadership have exhibited a revolution in their strength of purpose to defeat the Taliban insurgency in Pakistan, which they have come to see as a genuine mortal threat to the state. Militancy in Pakistan suffered a public relations disaster during the TTP's reign in the wider Swat region. The resulting sea change in public opinion toward the Pakistani Taliban gave the Pakistani military the opportunity it needed to conduct a comprehensive campaign against the militants in Swat and win. The military's morale was further buoyed after this success in Swat and by the killing of Beitullah Mehsud in a drone attack in August 2009. Such momentum bolstered support for another broad operation into South Waziristan, the TTP's home territory.

Several objectives are driving Pakistani military involvement in the FATA areas beyond South Waziristan:

Key Points

- The Pakistani government and military leadership have come to see the Taliban insurgency in Pakistan as a mortal threat to the state.
- In recent months, the military has built upon the momentum it achieved from its success in Swat and South Waziristan and the increasing unpopularity of the TTP (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan) in Pakistan by expanding its fight against militants to other parts of the FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas).
- The military has settled on a preferred counter-insurgency model of “clear, hold, build, and transfer” and is implementing this strategy in various stages across the FATA.
- Military operations across the FATA aim to:
 - Target and disrupt the leadership of the TTP
 - Interdict the TTP's ability to plan, prepare and launch terrorist attacks against the state
 - Facilitate local tribal uprisings against the TTP
 - End the TTP insurgency in the FATA and in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP)
- The key factor determining long-term success against the TTP will be whether the Pakistani military sustains the post-conflict phase of operations in a focused manner and whether or not the military incentivizes and empowers locals to resist renewed Taliban encroachment.

1. The military, through a protracted learning-by-doing process, has settled on a model of counterinsurgency it believes effective.¹ It is applying the model to parts of the north-west beset by militant activity, such as Bajaur, which is experiencing a TTP resurgence; Kurram, which has been ridden by sectarian conflict for years; and Orakzai, which seems to be becoming the new center of gravity for the TTP's leadership. These operations aim to bring peace to the FATA and end the TTP insurgency once and for all.
2. Despite overrunning TTP strongholds and successfully occupying South Waziristan, the military failed to capture or kill any significant portion of the organization or its leadership, which dispersed to North Waziristan, Kurram, and Orakzai agencies.² Operations in these areas endeavor to decapitate TTP leadership and end the possibility of TTP resurgence elsewhere.
3. Following the appointment of Hakimullah Mehsud as head of the TTP, militants launched (and continue to launch) a plethora of spectacular and extremely brutal attacks all across the country. According to information received by the Pakistani government, Taliban factions based in Orakzai were responsible for 90 percent of

the attacks.³ The military also learned of the high degree of cooperation between FATA-based Taliban and other sectarian and anti-state terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Jaish-e-Muhammad, which are responsible for many of the most high-profile attacks conducted outside the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).⁴ Operations underway aim to stem the tide of terrorist attacks against government and civilian targets by disrupting and destroying the groups responsible and by denying those groups the space and infrastructure necessary to plan and train for future attacks.

4. In several of the FATA agencies, local tribes have chosen to form tribal militias (lashkars) and rise up against Taliban militants in their areas. The Taliban often target these tribes for supporting the government. The military hopes to encourage such uprisings against the Taliban among other tribes by providing assistance to those tribes that have demonstrated concrete support for the government.

The following sections summarize and examine the conduct of recent and ongoing Pakistani military operations in Orakzai, Kurram, Bajaur, and North Waziristan agencies and highlight the strategic importance of each in the larger war against militancy in Pakistan's northwest.

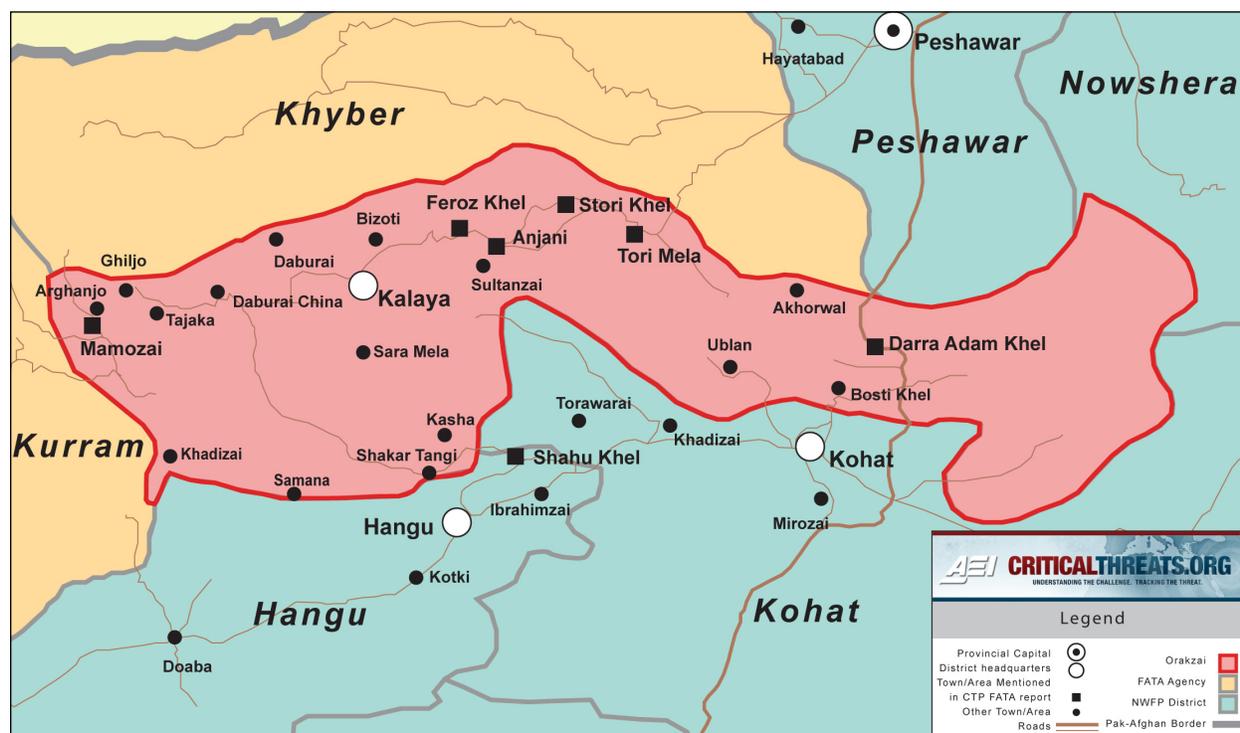
Orakzai

Ever since major military operations began winding down in South Waziristan, an operation in Orakzai agency has been impending. As early as the middle of November last year, Pakistani air assets repeatedly blitzed suspected Taliban locations in Orakzai agency and neighboring Hangu district. In a ten-day period in mid-November, Pakistani airstrikes killed nearly eighty suspected militants and destroyed dozens of Taliban hideouts.⁵

The exodus from South Waziristan triggered by Operation Rah-e-Nijat saw much of the TTP's strength shift to Orakzai agency, an area of strategic importance to Hakimullah and the TTP. When he was alive, Beitullah Mehsud delegated control of Orakzai, Kurram, and Khyber agencies to Hakimullah

Mehsud.⁶ As a result, the TTP network in Orakzai was already fairly developed before the Pakistani military incursion in recent months. Orakzai, abutting Khyber agency and Peshawar district, has been the launching pad for many attacks targeting NATO logistics into Afghanistan and suicide attacks into Peshawar, the capital of the NWFP.⁷ According to news reports, Pakistani government intelligence indicated that a majority of the suicide attacks carried out in northwest Pakistan in late 2009 were planned and executed from Orakzai.⁸ The agency is also reportedly a safe haven for many Punjabi militant groups active in the NWFP and beyond.⁹ Additionally, the Orakzai town of Darra Adam Khel hosts the world's largest illegal arms bazaar and the base of operations

Map of Orakzai Agency



for a particularly virulent faction of the TTP, the Commander Tariq Group led by Tariq Afridi.¹⁰ Gaining control over Orakzai would shut down a key operational and logistical hub for the Taliban in the north-west and give Islamabad a propaganda victory.

According to eyewitness reports, TTP fighters numbering in the hundreds, including those of “foreign” pedigree (usually meaning Uzbeks, Arabs, and Chechens—by many accounts, the fiercest, best-trained, and most highly motivated fighters in the TTP), streamed into Orakzai and Kurram agencies in the backs of pickup trucks and Land Cruisers, armed to the teeth with Kalashnikovs and RPGs. In many cases, TTP fighters looted, kidnapped, and extorted the local population in order to refill their coffers and armories.¹¹

However, the “refugee” TTP did not have completely free rein in Orakzai agency. The resident TTP faction in Orakzai, a separate but allied franchise of the TTP, welcomed and hosted those fighters fleeing the action in South Waziristan but placed conditions on their stay in Orakzai.¹² One Orakzai militant commander, Maulana Zainul Abideen, said that South Waziristan TTP were in Orakzai with the permission of his tribe’s elders and that “they accompany us wherever we go on patrol.”¹³ Another local commander, Mufti Khursheed, stated that the South Waziristan TTP were “not allowed to carry out any activity without. . . [their] permission.”¹⁴ The Orakzai TTP seem to be territorial and, while honoring their fellow militants’ plea for sanctuary, are wary that they might cause trouble that could in turn affect the Orakzai TTP’s own standing locally. The Stori Khel uprising, described below, confirmed this fear.

In late November, the Pakistani military made a significant advance into Orakzai. On November 24, Pakistani military assets and hardware reportedly moved into forward positions in Shahu Khel in Hangu district, on the border with Orakzai, in preparation for a larger operation in the agency.¹⁵ These deployments were punctuated with a series of airstrikes and smaller incursions into TTP-held villages in Orakzai. On December 4, military forces reportedly entered northern Orakzai at Chappri

Feroz Khel, which borders Khyber, and near Orakzai’s southern border at Shahu Khel in Hangu. The government had also set up registration camps in Hangu for civilians fleeing the Orakzai fighting.¹⁶

On December 12, Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani declared that a military operation in Orakzai agency was “under consideration.”¹⁷ The prime minister’s statement belied the fact that the Pakistani military was already significantly engaged in Orakzai and that, according to the United Nations, over forty thousand people had already been displaced by fighting in the region.¹⁸

The Pakistani military’s displays of strength in Swat and South Waziristan, combined with promises of government support, may have helped influence a local uprising against the TTP presence. In mid-December, reports circulated of local tribesmen killing TTP members. In the Stori Khel area of Orakzai, a tribe of the same name shot dead TTP members because they were “harassing local women,” causing disturbances, “violating tribal code,” and refusing to leave the area when requested. The Stori Khel tribe then formed a lashkar and began violently opposing and ejecting the Taliban fighters from their area. The tribe’s Shia faith may have given them additional motivation to resist the rabidly anti-Shia Taliban.¹⁹ Soon after the Stori Khel rose up and formed a lashkar, Pakistan Army gunships began targeting Taliban positions in Stori Khel, and troops deployed to the area.²⁰

The Taliban did not do much to improve its image in Orakzai. On January 4, TTP militants torched the entire village of Tori Mela in the Chappri Feroz Khel area, which borders Stori Khel. Most of the residents had already fled, and the Taliban reportedly burned the village as punishment for the tribesmen’s not staying and supporting them against the government.²¹ The TTP also retaliated against Stori Khel residents by destroying six shrines and exhuming and desecrating the body of a local spiritual leader.²²

Meanwhile, the Pakistani military continued its activities in the region into late December, clearing important logistical routes running from Khyber

agency to Darra Adam Khel and securing the key Chappri Feroz Khel area, a hotbed of militant activity.²³ Forces also managed to kill a key militant, Ehsanullah, the brother of the commander of TTP forces in Orakzai, Aslam Farooqi.²⁴ Operations pressed on into the new year, and clashes between the Stori Khel lashkar and TTP forces intensified. The military conducted frequent bombing raids in support of the lashkar in Stori Khel and in other areas of Orakzai suspected of being TTP strongholds.²⁵

On January 11, military forces reportedly “sealed off” Orakzai in anticipation of a large operation. The paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC) blockaded eighteen different entry and exit points into the agency from Kurram, Khyber, and Hangu, and troops deployed to villages in both upper and lower Orakzai, where the locals were said to be accommodating and assisting the military against the TTP. Artillery pieces and armor moved up to the Orakzai border, and government forces entered and secured Kalaya, the administrative capital of Orakzai. The advanced deployment was the culmination of several months of “discreet” deployment, with previous actions acting as a shaping operation to prepare the way for a larger assault. TTP militants were said to be scrambling to reinforce their positions in Shahu Khel, Anjani, Stori Khel, Chappri Feroz Khel, and other parts of Orakzai bordering Kurram, Khyber, and Hangu.²⁶

An assault following this staging of forces never materialized. Barring some limited skirmishing in border areas such as Chappri Feroz Khel, and occasional improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on military convoys, no substantial incursion has been reported.²⁷ It is possible an operation is ongoing under a complete media blackout. More likely, the military is attempting to maintain its cordon around Orakzai while switching its attention to rapidly erupting situations elsewhere in the FATA.

Some success is being reported, nonetheless, from the military’s actions in Orakzai. There has been a marked decrease in the number of terrorist attacks being carried out across the country. Pakistani military operations in Orakzai can claim some of the credit. Orakzai’s strategic location was a key factor in the TTP’s terror campaign in the northwest and Peshawar in particular. The military’s operations in Orakzai and its control of entry and exit routes from the agency have disrupted the group’s ability to continue its wave of attacks.²⁸ Aerial bombardment of TTP strongholds and attacks on TTP leadership by U.S. drones (such as the attack that mortally wounded Hakimullah) have disrupted the group’s ability to meet, plan, and prepare for more attacks. According to one Orakzai-based militant, “Taliban fighters are desperate, and now it is very hard for us to communicate. . . . Some of our friends have already distanced themselves from the mainstream organization.”²⁹

Kurram

Kurram is one of the most troubled yet most overlooked agencies in the FATA, and violence appears to have returned to it with some vigor. In mid-January, just as fighting in Orakzai appeared to reach its zenith, the situation in Kurram rapidly escalated into a short series of violent exchanges between militants and government forces. Kurram's strategic significance stems from its sizable border with Khost, Paktia, and Nangarhar provinces in Afghanistan; the agency hosts a large Afghan population, is a recurring

site of sectarian violence, and has frequently been reported as a point of Taliban cross-border activity.

Low-intensity operations aiming to flush out militant strongholds in the region and to interdict militants fleeing to Kurram from South Waziristan have been ongoing in Kurram agency for about two months.³⁰ Militants fleeing South Waziristan had reportedly poured into Kurram and disrupted local networks in their bid to regroup. One Kurram resident said, "They are kidnapping our elders and

Map of Kurram Agency



stealing our cars. . . . Kurram is in trouble because of them.” Others, as in Orakzai, reported the presence of non-Pashtun Arab, Chechen, and Uzbek fighters believed to be linked to al Qaeda. Another villager said of the Taliban influx, “They are here in the hundreds. . . . They tell us to do what they do. And whatever they like, they get it by force.”³¹

In November, the Pakistani military began launching a series of strikes in various parts of Kurram targeting local and migratory militants. Repeated airstrikes and gunship attacks killed dozens of militants, and, on November 19, FC forces stationed in Arawali in central Kurram pounded Taliban hideouts with indirect fire.³² The local FC commander also said forces had managed to clear and reopen the main road running between Thal and Parachinar, the largest town in Kurram, which had been closed for nearly two years due to militant activity.³³

Targeted military action against suspected militant hideouts continued into December, and locals reportedly began fleeing the intensifying military action.³⁴ On December 20, Sunni and Shia tribal leaders convened jirgas for the first time in two years and, in deliberations attended by “officials of the political administration,” agreed to take steps toward repairing sectarian relations and restoring peace in the region.³⁵ Violence in Kurram then receded and manifested itself only in sporadic attacks and bombings against government targets, only to heat up again in January.

On January 18, fierce skirmishing broke out between Pakistani government forces and militants in Ghalo Ghandi in central Kurram.³⁶ Elsewhere in the agency and in the Masozai area close to the Orakzai border, militants blew up the home of a tribal elder who was a staunch supporter of the government.³⁷ On January 25, days after the initial flurry of incidents, militants coming from Zangai in central Kurram attacked a military checkpost in the Tindo area, injuring several soldiers. The military called in close air support and repulsed the attack, killing nearly a dozen militants.³⁹ The next day,

clashes intensified as militants launched more assaults on FC checkposts in Tindo, but FC forces with air support were able to fend off the assaults.³⁹

In the past, much of the violence in Kurram resulted from long-standing sectarian differences, but recently an influx of displaced TTP from South Waziristan bolstered Taliban activities in the area.⁴⁰ While the government has the enthusiastic support of some local tribal lashkars, the main lashkars combating the TTP presence in Kurram, as currently seen in Orakzai, are Shia. The Shia tribes are ideologically opposed to the Taliban and seek to protect themselves against continued Sunni persecution at the hands of the Taliban and local extremists.⁴¹ Although the government encourages local lashkars to defend their areas against militants, it has not always sufficiently supported the tribes’ efforts. In July 2009, a leader of a local Shia lashkar called for government support as it battled Taliban militants attempting to exert control and cross the border into Afghanistan, but the government did not muster significant support.⁴²

Sectarian violence was particularly bitter in Kurram over the past two to three years, and the summer of 2007 saw strikingly violent exchanges.⁴³ Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), a particularly brutal sectarian terrorist organization in Pakistan, allegedly still maintains significant influence in the Lower Kurram Valley—so much so that, according to one report, “Lower Kurram is now an even stronger base [for SSP] than the SSP’s birthplace of Jhang district in Punjab.”⁴⁴ SSP was founded in Jhang in the early 1980s and has traditionally maintained strongholds in southern Punjab and Karachi, Pakistan’s financial capital.⁴⁵

Kurram has also seen a large influx of Afghan refugees over the years: the same report claims that Afghans now maintain near parity to locals in Kurram and are responsible for bringing with them a Deobandi ideology that permits and encourages sectarian violence. Both Afghan and Pakistani Taliban forces have over the years supported and abetted local Sunni tribes, particularly the Bangash tribe, in their inter-sect feuds with the local Shias.⁴⁶

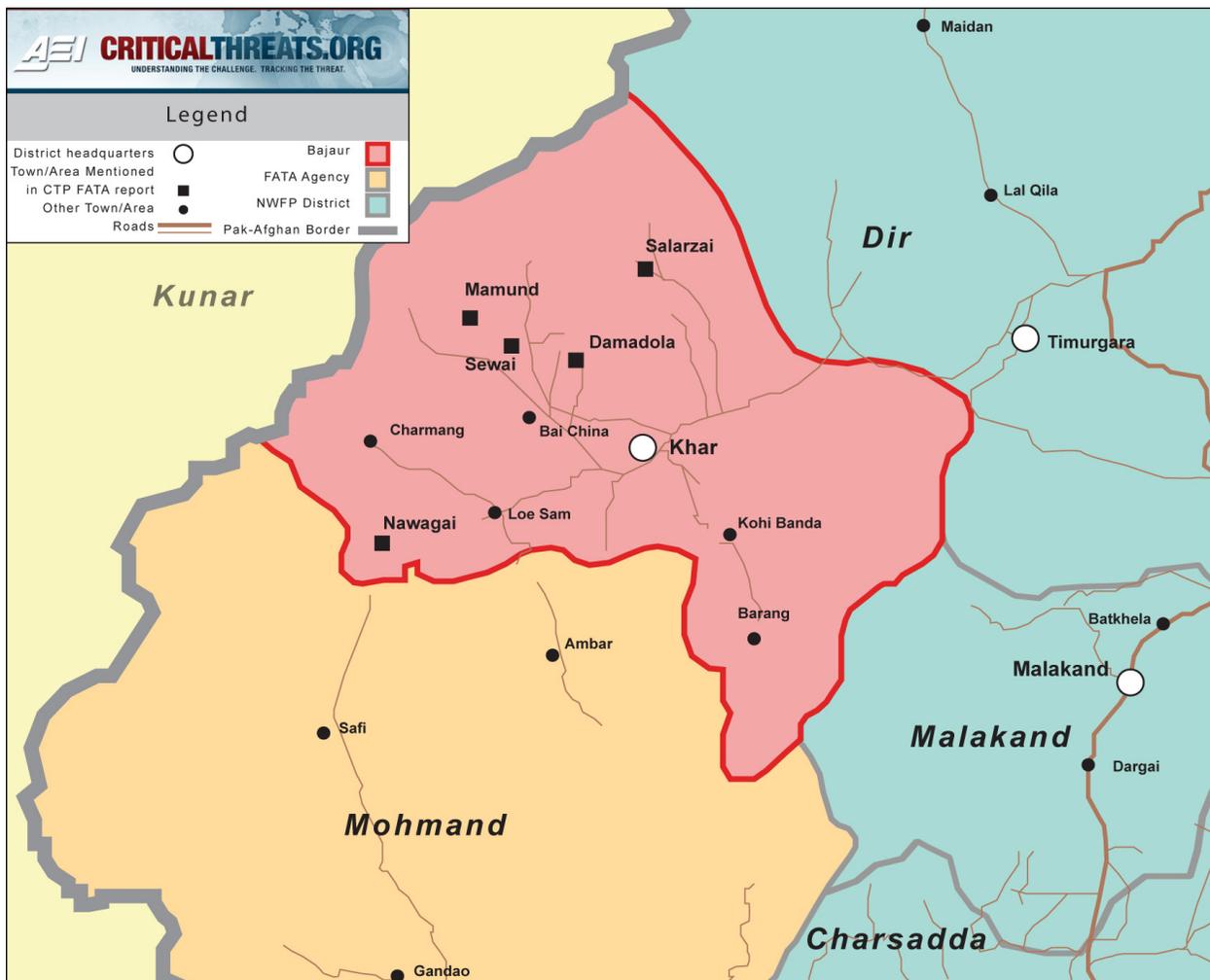
Bajaur

Despite the prosecution of a massive operation in Bajaur over the winter of 2008–2009, the agency slowly slipped away from government control over the course of 2009. Bajaur is now once again in the throes of renewed and extensive military operations. However, a key factor likely to assist the government and its local allies in combating the renewed militancy is a serious split in the senior lead-

ership of the Bajaur TTP. This development may give renewed hope to the army's efforts to finally stymie militant resurgence in the troubled agency.

Bajaur has ranked high in the Pakistani military threat matrix for several reasons. Bajaur was, for some time, suspected of being a hiding place for Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁴⁷ The militants in Bajaur, apart from challenging the writ of the

Map of Bajaur Agency



state, also maintained close links with militants in Afghanistan; the Swat TTP; and the late head of the TTP, Beitullah Mehsud. The leader of the TTP in Bajaur, Maulvi Faqir Muhammad, comes from the same ideological and organizational roots as Swat TTP commander and enemy-of-the-state, Mullah Fazlullah. Both were part of the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi, the Islamist organization headed by Fazlullah's father-in-law that was complicit in the violence in Swat. Faqir Muhammad also served as deputy chief of the TTP during the reign of Beitullah Mehsud.⁴⁸

In August 2008, the Pakistani military launched a massive operation in Bajaur agency targeting the hide-outs and strongholds of the TTP's Bajaur faction led by Maulvi Faqir Muhammad.⁴⁹ The offensive, code-named Operation Sher Dil (Lionheart) was closely coordinated with NATO forces across the border in Afghanistan.⁵⁰ Operation Lionheart also served as the laboratory for many of the Pakistani military's new counterinsurgency techniques under the stewardship of Inspector General Frontier Corps (IGFC) Tariq Khan.⁵¹ While the operation was immensely destructive and displaced hundreds of thousands of locals, it was successful in breaking the back of Taliban resistance in the agency and, crucially, convincing local tribes to support the government and form lashkars to combat the Taliban presence.⁵² A modified Bajaur model formed the basis of the Pakistani military's operations in Swat and South Waziristan.⁵³

The military declared victory in the agency in February 2009, but over the course of the year, Taliban influence continued to creep back in, and incidents of violence against local tribes or stationed military personnel became more frequent. Army and FC forces would routinely patrol and retaliate against militant attacks, but the actions taken were largely sporadic, as later in the year the military had shifted its focus and resources to Swat and then South Waziristan.⁵⁴

Taliban activity in Bajaur agency spiked dramatically during Operation Rah-e-Nijat in South Waziristan between October and November. This happened despite Maulvi Faqir Muhammad's urging the Bajaur TTP not to resist a limited operation launched in

Bajaur in the summer prior to Rah-e-Nijat.⁵⁵ Reports speculated that the Bajaur TTP were attempting to distract the military from its operation in the Mehsud tribal areas and to put a strain on the resources it would be able to bring to bear in South Waziristan.⁵⁶ Faqir Muhammad narrowly escaped being killed in a U.S. drone strike targeting a meeting of senior Taliban leaders in Damadola, Bajaur, on October 24.⁵⁷

Through November, sporadic violence persisted between the military and the militants. On November 16, newspapers reported that the Pakistani military had begun a search operation in Bajaur agency.⁵⁸ In addition to retaliating against militant ambushes on checkpoints, patrols, and convoys, the Pakistani military had for some time been receiving intelligence suggesting that many of the fighters of the TTP Swat, including the movement's leader, Mullah Fazlullah, had fled to Bajaur agency and possibly moved to Afghanistan across the Bajaur-Kunar border.⁵⁹

On November 19, news reports claimed Taliban fighters were interdicting local tribesmen and warning them of dire consequences if they chose to support the government against them.⁶⁰ Fighting intensified significantly from this point on: Khar, Mamund, and Nawagai sub-districts of Bajaur agency in particular were subjected to a week of near-daily violence, including airstrikes on suspected militant locations, ambushes on FC checkpoints, rocket attacks on military fixed positions, and armed clashes between militants and security forces.⁶¹

In late November, the Taliban began to make good on their threat to the Bajaur tribes. They began a concerted effort to target and kill uncooperative elders, either in the hope of breaking their support for the government or to punish them for opposing the Taliban. Afghan Taliban forces had used targeted killings against tribal elders to great effect across the border, and the campaign in Bajaur seemed a replication of this tactic.⁶² On November 27, Shahpoor Khan, a key anti-Taliban tribal elder and staunch supporter of the government, was assassinated in a bomb attack on his way home from Eid prayers. A bomb blast had killed his predecessor the year before.⁶³ Two days later, "unknown persons" shot

and killed the nephew of a senior Bajaur politician.⁶⁴ Less than a week later, a bomb attack on a mosque killed two more tribal elders.⁶⁵

The Salarzai tribe in particular suffered heavily at the hands of the Taliban. This tribe mobilized a lashkar and assisted the military against the Taliban during Operation Lionheart and had continued to police their areas throughout 2009, a source of continued irritation for the Bajaur TTP. In the period of a single week, crossing over into January 2010, the Taliban assassinated five Salarzai tribal elders in four separate attacks.⁶⁶ Despite the onslaught, the targeted killings failed to cow local tribes: in Salarzai sub-district, lashkars conducted joint patrols and operations with government forces, and in Salarzai and parts of Mamund sub-districts, tribes held grand jirgas reaffirming their support for the government and their commitment to “maintaining peace in their respective areas.”⁶⁷ Security forces responded to militant attacks and assassinations with continued bombardment on known Taliban hideouts.⁶⁸

By mid-January, the military looked like it was preparing for a concerted assault on parts of Bajaur in which the TTP had managed to reconstitute itself since February 2009. The military launched a number of assaults and bombardments on TTP positions in the latter half of January, some in conjunction with the Salarzai lashkar.⁶⁹ Then, on January 28, news emerged of a serious rift within the ranks of the TTP Bajaur. According to one report, “existing differences” within the TTP Bajaur’s senior leadership had recently widened, and on January 27, a militant shura decided to sack Maulvi Faqir Muhammad and appoint Maulana Muhammad Jamal (alias Maulvi Dadullah) as the new chief of the TTP Bajaur.⁷⁰ Maulvi Dadullah’s supporters, however, attempted to maintain a façade of unity and claimed that Faqir Muhammad had voluntarily resigned; Faqir Muhammad’s partisans insist he is still in charge. Local Taliban sources claim the dispute stemmed from when Faqir Muhammad forbade the Taliban from resisting a military assault in Bajaur over the summer.⁷¹ While dissent emerging from that decision was initially managed, the

renewed military assault probably brought festering internal conflicts to a boiling point.

The military seemed to waste no time in pressing home this advantage. Supported by tribesmen from the Salarzai lashkar, Pakistani forces drove toward Sewai, the headquarters of Mamund sub-district and a reconstituted stronghold for the TTP.⁷² On January 30, following a large suicide bomb attack on a security checkpoint in Bajaur’s main town of Khar, jets and gunships bombarded Taliban positions in Mamund and Salarzai areas, and government forces moved on centers of Taliban resistance in Sewai, Jani Shah, Azarnau, Sapari, Khaza, and Damadola areas of Mamund sub-district, north of Khar.⁷³

According to the officer in charge of the operation, Lt. Col. Rana Munnawar, Pakistani troops supported by gunships, attack aircraft, and special operations forces from the Army’s Special Services Group squared off against “about 1,000 militants.”⁷⁴ Nearly four thousand civilians fled Mamund for the relative safety of Khar as troops battled militants and bombarded Taliban bunkers and fixed positions. Troops seized Jani Shah and Sewai and stopped just short of Damadola.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, in another part of Bajaur, local tribesmen exacted their revenge on the Taliban by killing two militants and publicly displaying their bodies suspended from poles,⁷⁶ mirroring a method of dissuasion the TTP itself has often used.

By February 3, the military claimed to have seized the strategic height of Khaza that housed bunkers and a Taliban training facility;⁷⁷ killed eighty militants since the offensive commenced three days earlier; and begun moving on Damadola, one of the last remaining centers of Taliban resistance in Mamund.⁷⁸ On February 6, troops overcame stiff opposition to wrest Damadola from Taliban control for the first time in six years. The military raised the Pakistani flag in the town as a sign of victory and was reportedly well-received by the locals, but forces continued to face pockets of Taliban resistance.⁷⁹ According to Lt. Col. Munnawar, Operation Lionheart (the operation name remained the same as before) was to “continue till restoration of the government’s writ.”⁸⁰ This most recent offensive into Bajaur represents the most con-

certed set of actions taken against the Bajaur TTP since its reappearance in the summer of 2009. At the time of writing, this operation is still underway; whether Operation Lionheart is prosecuted to its logical end, and whether it will prove sufficient to finally break TTP resistance in the smallest of the seven

FATA agencies, remains to be seen. While the first iteration of Operation Lionheart ended prematurely, the more complete, long-term counterinsurgency doctrine formed from the army's experiences in Swat and South Waziristan, if now applied in Bajaur, gives reason for optimism.

North Waziristan

On January 31, 2010, a Taliban umbrella group under the name of the Shura-Ittehad-ul-Mujahideen, or the United Mujahideen Council, warned the Pakistani government against launching an operation in North Waziristan and threatened all-out war if the government violated standing peace agreements.⁸¹ This threat was issued less than ten days after the Pakistani military categorically stated that it was overstretched and would not have the ability to launch any new military operations in the tribal areas for six to twelve months.⁸²

The group responsible for the threat was a Taliban faction led by Hafiz Gul Bahadur. This faction holds near-complete sway over the vast majority of North Waziristan agency, hosts the Afghan Taliban Haqqani network led by Jalaluddin and Sirajuddin Haqqani, and alternates its support between other militant groups (like the TTP) and the state when it suits its needs.⁸³ Gul Bahadur signed a peace deal with the government in September 2006.⁸⁴ The peace deal has been an on-again, off-again arrangement between Gul Bahadur and the government over the past few years, with the most recent break occurring on June 29, when Gul Bahadur's men attacked Pakistani troops in North Waziristan. Gul Bahadur, however, reaffirmed the peace agreement early last fall when solicited by the government to stay neutral during the military operation in South Waziristan in October/November 2009.⁸⁵

January 2010 witnessed the highest level of tension between the government and Gul Bahadur since June 2009. On January 22, Pakistani forces left the confines of their base in Miram Shah; declared a curfew throughout the city; and, supported by helicopter gunships, surrounded a section of the city known as Machis camp, which, according to the military, served as the base for militants responsible for persistent IED attacks on military convoys. The military

killed fifteen militants and arrested fifty suspects in the ensuing operation.⁸⁶

While Gul Bahadur's group has not retaliated with force so far, it issued a strong rebuke against the operation. In a pamphlet released on January 31, the group claimed the military had violated the peace agreement by launching an operation in the area without first informing it.⁸⁷ The group also charged the government with violating the accord by establishing "a network of spies which spy on [the] Mujahideen and then the drone attack[s] which cause losses to both [the] Mujahideen and [the] local people"; manning abandoned checkpoints; setting up new checkpoints; and sending troops to Jani Khel and Bakka Khel areas of neighboring Bannu district, a Gul Bahadur area of influence.⁸⁸ The pamphlet threatened a "big-war" against the government if it launched an operation in the agency and urged locals to reach out to Afghan president Hamid Karzai to ask him for sanctuary in Afghanistan.⁸⁹ A coordinated series of air strikes carried out by multiple U.S. unmanned drones on several Gul Bahadur strongholds—the most severe attack in the drone war to date—could increase Gul Bahadur's unease.⁹⁰

The Pakistani government has been running an extensive human intelligence operation in North Waziristan at great cost.⁹¹ Pakistani intelligence agencies lost thirty operatives when militants in North Waziristan purged their ranks of suspected moles.⁹² While publicly condemning drone strikes on its own territory, Pakistan is said to be secretly cooperating with U.S. intelligence, including supplying some of the human intelligence used in targeting militants.⁹³

Although publicly the Pakistani military has rebuffed U.S. pressure to launch military action in North Waziristan (including its rather categorical declaration that it would launch no new operations for at least six months—a declaration made the day

before the raid in North Waziristan), there are indications that the Pakistani stance on North Waziristan has slowly been changing.⁹⁴ The heightened nervousness of the Gul Bahadur-led Taliban, exhibited by the grievances it lists in its pamphlet, hints at an increased militarization of the area. On February 2, Pakistani Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani in a rare press briefing “refuted reports” that the army had no intention of taking on militants in North Waziristan, saying, “Already, one army division is deployed there [the 7th Infantry Division], and we have taken action whenever required. . . . There is, however, no need at this point to start a steamroller operation in North Waziristan.”⁹⁵ These public denials, which the Pakistani military felt no

need to issue before, lend weight to rumors circulating that the uppermost reaches of the Pakistani military leadership is rethinking its stance toward North Waziristan and the Haqqani network.⁹⁶ The fact that much of the TTP fled to North Waziristan after Operation Rah-e-Nijat may have made the agency a much more inviting target for the military.

Any attempt to take on North Waziristan will likely require a significant military operation. While this is extremely unlikely in the short run for both strategic and logistical reasons (the Pakistani army says it risks seriously overstressing itself, and U.S. CENTCOM commander General David Petraeus agrees), the idea of an operation in North Waziristan is no longer out of the bounds of serious consideration.⁹⁷

Conclusion

As elucidated above, recent Pakistani military operations in the FATA have been extensive. Those performed in Orakzai and Bajaur agencies have been especially vigorous in their execution. Operations in Bajaur are taking advantage of a nascent leadership crisis in the Bajaur TTP, and the recent death of Hakimullah Mehsud provides the Pakistani military with an excellent opportunity to press home its advantage in Orakzai. By maintaining pressure on the TTP's various factions, the military is reversing and preventing a Taliban resurgence in parts of the FATA that previously served as militant havens.

The war against the TTP cannot be won through the perpetual prosecution of military force, however. Whether or not these parts of the FATA will see a permanent remission of Taliban influence is probably more dependent on the post-military phase of Pakistan's new "clear, hold, build, and transfer" counterinsurgency strategy.⁹⁸ Swat is in the middle of a "build" phase, and South Waziristan is just beginning to experience such reconstruction as well. Bajaur saw a Taliban comeback in 2009 due to a weak "hold" and nonexistent "build" phase, and Orakzai is only now experiencing the very beginning of a "clear" phase. The government does, however, now have

significant support from local tribes in Bajaur, Kurram, and Orakzai. It would do well to offer significant support to such local allies where they emerge, as they put themselves at great risk for the stance they take and are key sources of human intelligence. Strongly supported anti-Taliban lashkars will inflict further damage to the TTP's myth of invincibility and popularity in the tribal areas.

Top U.S. generals and government officials have lauded the Pakistani military's recent operations because of the reversals they have dealt the Taliban on its own turf. These officials have also enthusiastically encouraged the Pakistani government's genuine commitment to combating the TTP.⁹⁹ The change in thinking inside the Pakistani government and military leadership regarding the Taliban and the threat it poses to the state, the military's development of a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy, and the Taliban's fatal turnaround in public opinion are the most significant developments in the war against militancy in Pakistan for years. The recent and current military operations are results of these changes. Whether the government can provide the necessary focus and resolve once the shooting stops remains to be seen, but reasons for optimism are beginning to emerge.

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