



## The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan: The Bajaur Case

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### **Introduction**

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

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

Today at last, after months of apparently contrasting policies, Pakistan and the U.S. are directing their military assets towards the areas controlled by Baitullah, prompting a spate of suicide attacks in Pakistan and ongoing clashes in Waziristan, as Pakistan ground troops approach the region ruled for years by TTP insurgents.

Certainly Pakistan has changed course where Taliban insurgents are concerned, starting in August 2008 with the Army operation in Bajaur agency. The Bajaur offensive, in fact, seems to be the starting point of a different kind of military engagement, a coordinated effort which culminated with the Swat operation in April 2009. Controlling the former Malakand Division entailed reining in the area bordering the restive Kunar province in order to cut off the insurgents based in Malakand from the Tribal Areas and

the well trained Bajauri fighters led by Faqir Mohammed. In other words, the new military leadership in Pakistan, led by General Kayani, confronted the militants' threat systematically, with an eye at severing possible escape routes for the Swati insurgents to escape west or receive reinforcements from the unstable border areas and Afghanistan.

The NEFA Foundation has closely followed the evolution of the Taliban insurgency in Pakistan's west and recent developments in the region. The result is a series of reports aimed at covering the situation in the field, starting with a comprehensive analysis of the military operation in Bajaur. The series will continue with reports on Swat and Waziristan, following closely the advance of the Pakistani Army towards the TTP bastions in South Waziristan. The ongoing series will be based mainly on the NEFA team's first hand research in the field.

### **The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan: The Bajaur Case**

Since August 2008, the Pakistani military offensive in Bajaur tribal Agency, which soon spilled over to Mohmand, has stolen the headlines from Waziristan as the epicentre of the Islamist insurgency in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) fighters were under pressure across the two provinces starting in early August in Bajaur and three weeks afterwards in Mohmand Agency, displaying exceptional resistance skills on several occasions and withdrawing to remote mobile bases in the mountains once confronted by an extraordinarily determined Pakistani Army. It seems undeniable, in fact, that in the northern FATA, Islamabad changed its attitude in comparison with the strategy adopted in Waziristan, where military operations were more often used to "buy"/obtain leverage, rather than to defeat the insurgents once and for all. Yet, in the north-western triangle, since the summer of 2008, it has been clear that Islamabad was ready to confront the insurgents head on, achieving unprecedented results in the FATA theatre, while displacing almost a third of the civilian population.

This NEFA Foundation Special Report will primarily focus on the Bajaur case, extending the analysis to Mohmand when the integration between the two local arms of the TTP made a comprehensive discussion necessary. The report will not provide an in-depth narrative of the Pakistani military offensive, instead focusing exclusively on analyzing the unique characteristics of the Taliban insurgency in the FATA's north.

The Taliban phenomenon blossomed late in both Bajaur and Mohmand, and until 2007, the insurgents' presence was significant, but extremely low profile there. More, it was a logistical base for the resurgent Taliban militants operating on both sides of the border, rather than a frontline. In terms of planning terrorist operations, however, the importance of Bajaur cannot be understated, in particular in relation to attacks aimed at western targets or interests. Terrorist plots targeting both London and Barcelona,<sup>1</sup> respectively, in 2005 and 2007, were linked to al Qaida operatives based in the Bajaur area. Moreover, the Agency border passes, in particular the Nawa Pass, have functioned for years as a revolving door to and from neighboring Kunar Province in Afghanistan. Bajaur is also well known as the most religious of the seven Tribal Agencies and is therefore particularly exposed to the Taliban ideology. Mohmand, a larger agency situated south of Bajaur, has experienced a similar kind of Islamist insurgency, which spread along similar fault lines, accelerating in 2007, ignited by the locals' reaction to the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) operation. The Red Mosque, in fact, hosted a large proportion of students from the Tribal Areas and when Army commandos stormed the complex killing scores in July 2007, a violent reaction among tribal militants was inevitable.

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<sup>1</sup> Maulvi Omar interviewed by the NEFA Foundation. August 2008.  
<http://www.nefafoundation.org/multimedia-intvu.html#maulviomar2>.



**Figure 1: Maulana Faqir Mohammed, Naib Amir TTP  
Bajaur, August 2008**

Armed militancy in Bajaur is the result of an explosive combination of factors, as the area is situated at the crossroads of several strands of armed political Islamism. Located to the east of the former Malakand Division, the Tribal Agency was significantly affected by the ideology of the Tehrik-e-Nefaz-e-Shariat Muhammadi (TNSM), a militant Islamist group active in Swat, Lower Dir, and the northern Tribal Areas. Most of the Taliban leaders in Bajaur are former TNSM cadres, although the organization was partially obscured by the creation of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in December 2008. Until then, the outfit created by Sufi Mohammed in the early '90s had been the primary face of political Islam in the area. The TNSM influence is extremely significant given that the group can rightfully be considered a precursor of organized militancy in the region. In 1994, the organization established a form of Sharia-based legislation in Swat following an armed, Taliban-like insurgency. Notwithstanding the '94 insurrection, in Bajaur and most of the former Malakand Division, the TNSM operated as a mainstream organization and has continued to do so even after it was banned in 2002.

Where Bajaur is concerned, however, the presence of the TNSM is not enough to explain the recurrence of a Taliban-like insurgency in the area. The weight of the Kunar factor during the years of the anti-Soviet Jihad, in other words the existence of a cross-border route connecting the two tribal agencies to eastern Afghanistan, cannot be underestimated in this context. This vast network of contacts and cross-border paths was originally established by the anti-Soviet mujahideen, mainly Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami, and served as the conduit for a conglomerate with interests in smuggling, Jihad, and borderline activities centred around the Durand Line. These links were used by fleeing Taliban insurgents following the collapse of the Islamic Emirate in December 2001, and those who facilitated their escape at the time of need were the same militants who would lead the Pakistani Taliban movement five years later. Interviewed by the NEFA Foundation, TTP official spokesman and Central Shura member, Maulvi Omar, openly stated that local militants established camps for Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaishi-Muhammed (JM) fighters who were fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan; with

them, scores of Uzbeks, Arabs, Chechens, and even Europeans reached the tribal agencies seeking refuge. We can assume that the prolonged permanence of foreign fighters in the area might have something to do with the specific role played by Bajaur in relation to hosting foreign operatives with an international Jihadist agenda.

In addition, the ideological rigor of the Bajauri militants is explained by the fact that most of the clerics hailing from the Agency are educated at Madaris run by Ishaat-ul-Tawheed, including TTP leader Faqir Mohammed. The organization is modeled around the madrassa founded by Maulana Mohammed Tahir Panjpir, in Panjpir, Swabi District, NWFP. The Panjpiris are linked to the Jemaat-e-Ulema Islam (JUI), both Sami ul Haq and Fazlur Rehman groups, and are close to the Ahl-e-Hadith ideology. The Panjpiri madaris network was a crucial influence for the Taliban movement in the Pak-Afghan region. Faqir Mohammed perfectly epitomizes the type of leader favoured by the Panjpiris, a dual Amir that leads both from the religious and the military point of view, in orchestrated continuity with paradigmatic figures such as Mullah Mohammed Omar and the early Sufi Mohammed, for example.



**Figure 2: The face of the TTP, Maulvi Omar. Bajaur, May 2008**

Bajaur is the smallest among Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, hosting approximately 600,000 inhabitants divided between two main tribes: the Uthmankhels, who are larger in number, and the Tarkani, who are more powerful and traditionally closer to their Afghan cousins across the border. The Taliban insurgency concerns mainly the Tarkanis, who inhabit the east and north of the Agency. The Mamund, a subtribe of the Tarkani, is of critical importance when the Bajauri insurgency is concerned. The western and southern districts, Uthmankhel and Bareng respectively, were substantially less affected by fighting and Taliban operations.

The epicentre of the Taliban phenomenon is located in Mamund District, where Damadola is situated, not far from the Durand Line; Salarzai, Chamarkand, and Nawagai Districts were also heavily affected by fighting.

The Bajauri Taliban are a vital component of the TTP and are well represented within the umbrella organization by the Agency's Taliban leader, Maulana Faqir

Mohammed, who – since the movement’s creation – has been Baitullah Mehsud’s deputy Amir and one of the group’s leading lights. According to many, it was Faqir Mohammed who promoted the idea of an umbrella organization in late 2007, and then proceeded to offer Baitullah the leadership position in recognition of his role as Mullah Omar’s main representative east of the border. Although Faqir confirmed<sup>2</sup> this version himself, the NEFA Foundation could not independently verify the claim. Nonetheless, what really counts in this context, is the Maulana’s undeniable pre-eminence within the Agency, a primacy earned against powerful rivals and established through both shrewd alliances and sheer military force.

The Bajauri Taliban, in fact, although unified under the TTP, can rely on other charismatic figures, who at times, have even challenged the leader’s authority. Haji Naimatullah heads the Kharwan-e-Naimatullah group, active in Salarzai; Ziaur Rehman leads the “Afghan” faction; Waliur Rehman is particularly close to Arab and foreign operatives; Maulana Abdullah is in charge in the Charmang area, in District Chamarkand, and he is in turn very close to Ziaur Rehman, although he stills responds to the orders of Faqir Mohammed; and Amir Sultan controls part of the Sewai area. These groups are integrated under the TTP umbrella to a different extent, ranging from groups that depend directly on Maulana Faqir’s orders, to others who aspire to some degree of autonomy from the central TTP leadership.

Where the evolution of the Taliban phenomenon is concerned, the peculiarity of Bajaur is rooted in the role “assigned” by the militants to the Agency in the early post-9/11 years. As mentioned, if Waziristan emerged immediately as the primary frontline of the low intensity confrontation between Taliban militants and the federal government, Bajaur was initially intended to be a logistical base and provide a safer hiding place for fleeing foreign militants, far away from the Army’s spotlights and with the added benefit of a well trodden path leading directly to one of the most inaccessible areas of Afghanistan, the Kunar-Nuristan triangle. As a consequence, local Taliban sympathizers and militants found themselves better equipped than others to operate training camps and offer sanctuary to high profile al Qaida-affiliated leaders. For years, the northern FATA have played a critical role in relation to the presence of foreign terrorist operatives on Pakistani soil.

Paradoxically, it will be exactly this aspect that could drag the northern tribal agencies into an all-out conflict with the Pakistan military, especially since Washington and Islamabad agreed to step up military pressure and started targeting operatives hiding in Bajaur, including the local tribesmen who were providing shelter to them. As a consequence, Bajaur received international media attention in 2006, when an unmanned U.S. aircraft hit the village of Damadola<sup>3</sup>, apparently targeting Ayman al Zawahiri and other key al Qaida leaders. If he was there on that occasion, al Zawahiri survived the strike, but Faqir Mohammed, being the most prominent leader in the area, was forever exposed as al Zawahiri’s Bajauri friend. He further showed a predisposition for the role, given the fact that following the January 2006 bombing, he reportedly remained in the Damadola area for 2 weeks, talking to the media and leading the prayers for the deceased<sup>4</sup>. In 2005, his house was raided<sup>5</sup> due to the assumption that he

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<sup>2</sup> Faqir Mohammed interviewed by the NEFA Foundation. August 2008.  
<http://www.nefafoundation.org/multimedia-intvu.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “Pakistanis Say U.S. Raid Left 4 or 5 Militants Dead,” The New York Times, January 18, 2008,  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/18/international/asia/18pakistan.html>

<sup>4</sup> Ilyas Khan, “Shock and Awe on the Afghan Border,” BBC News,  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/6099348.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/6099348.stm)

<sup>5</sup> Sohail Abdul Nasir “Al Zawahiri’s Pakistani Ally: A Profile of Maulana Faqir Mohammed,” The Jamestown Foundation, February 9, 2006.

was hosting al Qaida's top brass during the winter season. Faqir Mohammed had become a high profile target for Pakistan and the USA.

In October 2006, a Madrassa in Chingai, Damadola, two kilometres from the location of the January hit, was destroyed by a second missile attack. 83 died, including Maulana Liaquat, a key leader of the TNSM and a wanted man suspected of harbouring foreign militants and Afghan Taliban. Initially, Faqir Mohammed was also given up for dead in the attack, but the following morning he resurfaced once again, leading prayers near the site of the attack.

That sequence of attacks on Bajaur's Taliban-like notables ignited the chain of events that would eventually lead to a full blown military conflict in the agency approximately two years afterwards. If until late 2006 the Taliban had existed under the radar in Bajaur, they had now begun to fight and to take control of the territory directly. Their advance from Mamund District outward was extremely rapid; relying on the widespread presence of the TNSM across the province, the Taliban widened their hold on north and north eastern Bajaur in 2007. Within 12 months they were holding over half of the Agency through a parallel executive system reinforced by an effective judiciary acting in accordance with the Sharia law.

It must also be noted that the tribal Taliban's advance was largely based on a local population that, although certainly to some extent intimidated, was not opposed to the swift application of Sharia law-inspired recipes. The reason for the population's positive disposition toward an effective judiciary is to be found in the decades of frustration experienced by the tribals, who had endured endemic corruption and the weight of a draconian legal piece of legislation, the Frontier Crime Regulations Act (FCR) devised in 1848 by a colonial power in order to rein in a restive subdivision of the Raj. The FCR, although revised in 1901<sup>6</sup>, is still, to this day, the FATA's legal framework.

The Taliban was able to exploit the inherent weakness of the legal framework based on the figure of the Political Agent. The TNSM cadres who led the Bajauri arm of the Taliban banked on the locals' need for a fast and fair legal system. This was instrumental in gaining the support of wider segments of the population, support that began to decrease exponentially once the consequences of the military offensive started to affect the locals. Since then, the Bajauri people's number one priority has been the restoration of peace in the area, and support for the militants has weaned significantly, at least in terms of armed militancy.

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[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=641&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=181&no\\_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=641&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=181&no_cache=1)

<sup>6</sup> Jules Stewart, "Savage Border," Sutton Publishing, 2007.





**Figure 3: Bajaur, October 2008. Civilians keeping their hands raised while driving, in order to signal the fact they are not armed to Army helicopters hovering over head.**

Unquestionably, something changed in Bajaur where the strategic approach of the Pakistani Army is concerned. What we need to understand is which factors contributed to this radical change of mindset at the army headquarters.

The constant pressure of Islamabad's American ally must be taken into account, in particular if we consider that Bajaur was deemed to be the most likely hiding place for the type of foreign operatives who represent Washington's number one priority in the area. Until 2008, given the relatively low profile maintained for so long by the militants in the northern FATAs, the federal government had refrained from intervening in Bajaur with full force, especially considering the sort of troubles they were experiencing in neighboring Swat for most of 2007 and early 2008. The risk of destabilizing the border area while Pakistani troops were pounding Swat without great success, was enough to motivate an indefinite postponement of large scale operations there. Once the militants' presence in Swat had been diminished, if not dealt with, and a complex system of "peace" agreements were set in place in May 2008, Pakistan was surely better positioned to attack the enemy.

The second factor was probably linked to the specific characteristics of the northern tribal insurgency. As mentioned, during the low profile phase, militants established a parallel network of justice courts, and that proved extremely effective in terms of gaining consent. It could be argued that the threat posed by a parallel administration and judiciary was perceived by Islamabad as being far greater than the one posed by the insurgents in South Waziristan. Besides, the Taliban support network in the north was based on the network cultivated by the TNSM, a mainstream political entity which was able to guarantee a much greater degree of penetration within the fabric of society. By Islamabad standards, if the federal government is used to destabilized tribal areas, although not to this extent, the establishment of a parallel system of this kind was unprecedented and inconceivable to the central authorities, particularly given the invasive potential of such a trend in north western Pakistan. In other words, although from a military point of view Waziristan surely represents the backbone of the Pakistani Taliban insurgency, Bajaur is certainly the Agency where the Taliban have invested the most in terms of self-governance. The alternative infrastructure

experimented by the Taliban in Bajaur was far too threatening to be left unchecked as it might have provided the Islamist movement with a credibility that cannot be acquired by the means of political violence and war. Effective Sharia Courts had the potential to introduce the Taliban ideology to the country's frustrated middle classes, a world away from the movement's birth place along the Frontier.

Third but not least, we must take into account an extremely significant factor, and one which has more to do with Islamabad itself than with the FATAs: Musharraf resigned as Army Chief of Staff on November 28, 2007, but until August 2008, he was still the country's President and reportedly a problematic presence within Army circles. Many well-placed analysts observe that although General Kayani had already succeeded Musharraf in late '07, it is only in the second half of the following year that a shift of attitude worth attention can be seen. Accordingly, the Bajaur operation started on August 1, 2008 and for the first time, an Army Brigade was placed under control of the Frontier Corps (FC) Inspector General<sup>7</sup>. This is to say that for the first time, the FC were positioned to do their job with the resources necessary to obtain results, as the paramilitary Frontier Corps itself lacks expertise and is largely manned by low-paid ethnic Pashtuns recruited among the tribes as a form of proportional handout from the federal government to each tribal group.

Kayani's arrival has unquestionably affected the army and well placed sources speak of improved efficiency among high-ranking officers and better planning in relation to the conflict in the FATAs.

Most likely, a combination of these three factors resulted in renewed motivation among the troops and increased confidence among officers assigned to man the frontlines in Bajaur and Mohmand.

In the next instalment of this three part series, the NEFA Foundation will analyze in detail how the Army offensive evolved throughout the late Summer and the Fall of 2008, to culminate, in February 2009, with the peace accord between Islamabad and Faqir Mohammed's mainstream faction. Part two will also take into consideration one of the defining aspects of the Bajauri tribal insurgency, i.e. the impact of the Sharia Courts system created by the Taliban in the areas controlled by Islamist militants. The institutionalization of Taliban rule in Bajaur, in fact, represented the apex of the insurgents' most threatening campaign, a coordinated effort aimed at institutionalizing Taliban rule in the Tribal Areas. Islamabad's reaction – for once – was determined and effective, and prepared the ground for a possible advance towards Swat.

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<sup>7</sup> Interviews by the author. August 2008. Peshawar, Pakistan.