

The New Locus of Radical Islam: Pakistan's North West Frontier Province

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In recent years, Pakistan's northernmost province, the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), has become a global center of Taliban, pro-Taliban, and general Islamic extremist activity. Islamic radicalism in the NWFP threatens Pakistan, the entire South Asian region and American interests in South Asia.

Background

Bordering Afghanistan to the north, the lawless, Taliban-dominated Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) to the west and conflict-laden Pakistani Kashmir to the east, Pakistan's North West Frontier Province holds strategic significance for the future stability of Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Historically, the region has long been of import to the many conquerors, governments and travelers that have sought to reach India via Afghanistan.

The well-known Khyber Pass which links Kabul with the NWFP capital of Peshawar, is a key supply route for U.S. and NATO soldiers in Afghanistan. Peshawar lies on an east-west road linking Kabul to the Pakistani capital of Islamabad, and an east-west railway runs from the Afghan border through Peshawar to Lahore, a major Pakistani city in the Punjab province.

Adding to the region's strategic significance is the short distance between Peshawar and the Pakistani capital of Islamabad – a mere 96 miles – fueling concerns that the Islamic radicalism of Peshawar may in the future destabilize Islamabad. Furthermore, the majority population of the NWFP, the Pashtuns, also comprise the majority population of neighboring Afghanistan, currently battling the re-emergence of the Taliban. And, Pakistan's Atomic Energy Commission reportedly stores much of its nuclear waste in the NWFP, stoking fears that Islamic militants may obtain sensitive nuclear materials.

With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1978, Peshawar became the military and political center of the Afghan anti-Soviet coalition and the central base of operations for the Islamic forces seeking the ouster of the Soviets. Following the end of that conflict in 1989, the region found itself replete with Afghan and Arab jihadi fighters and Pashtun refugees.

When western forces routed the Taliban out of Afghanistan in 2001, Taliban military commanders and their Al-Qa'ida, Chechen and Uzbek allies fled to the mountainous

NWFP. In October 2002, the Islamist alliance, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), secured an absolute majority in the NWFP's Provincial Assembly.

Over the last number of years, the NWFP has become a base, conduit and safe haven for Islamic extremist activity. Today, the NWFP is a global center of radical Islam, terrorism and violence. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, 1,190 people were killed in the NWFP in 2007, up from 163 killed there in 2006. Those killed included 459 civilians, 193 security personnel and 538 militants. Of the 56 suicide attacks in Pakistan in 2007, 27 occurred in the NWFP.

The Talibanization of the NWFP

Two factors converged post September 11th enabling Islamic militants in the NWFP to gain influence and power in the region: the perceived failure of the central Pakistani government to efficiently provide basic services and law and order to the area, and the popular sentiment that the United States was waging a war against Islam following its invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of the September 11th attacks. In contrast to the previous balance of power between nationalists and Islamists in the 99-seat NWFP provincial assembly, the 2002 elections saw religious parties secure 67 seats in the assembly.

Emulating the edicts of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Islamic radicals in the NWFP began to impose strict Islamic rule in the province. They closed down girls schools, theaters, video and music stores, billiard clubs and barber shops. Militants sent threatening letters to store owners, issued verbal threats and resorted to store bombings. In January 2008, for example, two bomb blasts in a Peshawar village killed one man and destroyed two video centers and two barber shops. This was not an isolated case.

Heading the Islamic insurgency in the NWFP is cleric Maulana Qazi Fazlullah, the son-in-law of Maulana Sufi Mohammad, founder of the Al-Qa'ida-linked Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), the Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Laws, which Mohammad established in 1989 upon his return from the Afghan jihad. After the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, Mohammad reportedly led 10,000 Pakistani fighters into Afghanistan to battle American forces. In 2002, after returning from Afghanistan, the Pakistani government imprisoned Mohammad and banned the TNSM, a constituent organization of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Pakistani Taliban, based in the FATA. The TTP is led by Baitullah Mehsud, an ally of Al-Qa'ida believed responsible for dozens of suicide attacks, including the one in December 2007 that killed former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto.

Following his father-in-law's incarceration, Fazlullah assumed control of the banned organization. He is based in the NWFP's scenic and settled Swat Valley, once a popular tourist destination. When he set up a clandestine FM radio channel to preach to Pakistani villagers in 2004, Fazlullah became known as "Maulana Radio." His broadcasts promote the precepts of Taliban Islam including bans on music, dancing, television and videos. He seeks compulsory beards for men and campaigns regularly for the strict segregation of

women from men, mandatory veils for women and he exhorts girls and women to stay home and not seek an education.

Since 2006, Fazlullah has also used his illegal radio program to mount a campaign against the polio vaccine, claiming that it is a Western conspiracy to render Muslims infertile. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), polio cases began to rise in the NWFP in the wake of Fazlullah's campaign, where 60% of vaccination refusals have been based on "religious reasons." WHO has also reported the verbal and physical harassment of its health officials by Islamic militants seeking to stop administration of the vaccine.

Following the government siege of the Lal Masjid mosque in Islamabad in July 2007, militants from the NWFP escalated violent attacks on government and military targets. In response, the Pakistani government sent troops to the province to contain the growing violence. Confronted with roadside and suicide attacks, the Pakistani troops retreated. Fazlullah's militia successfully overran most of the Swat Valley and assumed control of the police and court system there. Hoping for the restoration of law and order, many local residents welcomed the Islamic militants who then began to impose strict *Sharia* law.

Fazlullah's army maintained control in Swat until the Pakistani army, backed by helicopter gunships and artillery, mounted a second major offensive in November 2007. According to the Pakistani government, many of Fazlullah's militants fled into the hills, more than 250 militants were killed, including senior Fazlullah commander Khan Khatab, responsible for spearheading many of the militants' operations, and fifty militants were arrested.

Other Connections to International Terrorism

In addition to the Taliban and pro-Taliban forces, other international terrorist groups are believed to have some presence - training bases, offices, and/or safe-havens - in the North West Frontier Province, including Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HUM), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JEM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LEJ), all members of Usama bin Ladin's International Islamic Front formed in 1998, and all banned by the U.S. as Foreign Terrorist Organizations.

HUM, JEM, and LET are all Pakistani-based groups that are fighting against Indian rule in Kashmir. The proximity of the NWFP to Pakistani-held Kashmir, Islamabad and the Punjab Province - the sites of these groups' major terrorist attacks - makes the region an inviting haven.

JEM has been linked to the anti-Army and anti-Shiite incidents in the Swat Valley and to the anti-Shiite violence in the FATA. It is said to have a presence in several areas of the NWFP, including Peshawar and Kohat as well as south of Peshawar in adjacent Darra Adam Khel, at the eastern end of FATA's Orakzai Agency (along with HUM, LET and LEJ). Darra Adam Khel is the illegal arms mecca of South Asia, easily providing Pakistani terror groups with all their weapons and ammunition needs. LET has been

active in the NWFP's Balakot Valley, where it reportedly maintained terror training camps prior to the 2005 earthquake.

A Sunni extremist outfit that seeks to violently transform Pakistan into a Sunni theocracy, LEJ is believed to have close ties with TTP leader Baitullah Mehsud and to carry out attacks on behalf of the Taliban and Al-Qa'ida. Focusing its attacks on the Shiites in Pakistan, it is suspected of involvement in the January 2007 suicide attack on a Shiite procession in Peshawar that killed 15 people including three senior police officials and the January 2008 suicide bombing at a Shiite mosque in Peshawar that killed 12 people and wounded 25 others. LEJ reportedly ships arms and ammunition from the NWFP into neighboring Punjab Province where it is most active and it reportedly aids other terrorists with safehouses, false identities, and protection in several Pakistani cities, including Peshawar.

Changes in Federal and Provincial Governments

Pakistani elections in February and March 2008 brought changes on the federal and provincial levels. The party of assassinated leader Benazir Bhutto, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), assumed power in the parliament and its candidate Yousuf Raza Gilani became prime minister. Upon assuming his position, Prime Minister Gilani announced that his policy toward the Taliban in Pakistan was based on three components: launching a dialogue with the Taliban, offering economic development packages to the regions in which it is active, and ordering military action as a last resort.

In Pakistan's National Assembly, the Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party (ANP) and the Pakistan's People's Party (PPP) together captured 19 of the NWFP's share of 35 National Assembly seats.

Disillusioned with rising levels of Islamic violence, the strict imposition of *Sharia* law, and failure of the religious parties to deliver basic services and infrastructure, NWFP voters in provincial elections ousted the ruling coalition of six religious parties, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), giving them only nine seats in the 99-seat provincial assembly. Leading the new provincial government is the Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party (ANP) and the Pakistan's People's Party (PPP), which together captured 41 seats.

NWFP-Islamic Militant Accord

Signaling the start of the new central government's controversial policy of dialogue and accommodation with the Taliban, the government of Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, in April 2008, released TNSM leader Maulana Sufi Muhammad from his NWFP prison.

The Pashtun nationalists in the NWFP had also vowed to talk to the Taliban in order to establish peace in the region and talks were held in the spring of 2008 between the provincial government, Pakistani Taliban and the outlawed TNSM.

In May 2008, the Pashtun-led provincial government concluded a 15-point pact with pro-Taliban militants in the Swat Valley. The Islamic militants gave assurances that they would cease violent attacks against government, security and civilian targets, dismantle terrorist training centers, hand over foreign militants, stop carrying weapons in public, permit girls' and women's education and stop obstructing vaccination programs. In return, the government agreed to gradually withdraw security forces from Swat, enforce *Sharia* law in seven provincial districts, (roughly 45 percent of the NWFP), and terminate legal proceedings against hundreds of TNSM militants.

Despite the accord, Islamic militant activity has continued in the NWFP. In the wake of the agreement, girls' schools, video stores and cinemas continue to be bombed and torched, the Peshawar military base has come under rocket fire and various government infrastructure targets such as electricity pylons and power substations have been vandalized. In addition, Islamic militants from the nearby FATA areas regularly come to Peshawar and intimidate and harass the local population. Recently, they have taken to abducting middle to upper middle class residents and visitors to the NWFP in order to extract ransoms to help finance their militant activities.

Worried about the level of Islamic militant activity in the FATA tribal district of Khyber Agency which borders the NWFP, and its spillover into nearby Peshawar, the Pakistani government launched a military offensive against Islamic militants in Khyber Agency in late June 2008. Five miles from Peshawar, in the Khyber Agency town of Bara, is the headquarters of Lashkar-e-Islam (LEI), an Islamic extremist outfit led by Mangal Bagh that seeks to impose Islamic law in Khyber Agency and beyond. LEI militants were responsible for two separate kidnappings of women and Christians in Peshawar.

The Future of the NWFP

Policymakers and political analysts remain skeptical of the Pakistani government's willingness and ability to rout out the pro-Taliban network in the North West Frontier Province. American officials and others criticized the Spring 2008 accord with the militants arguing that the government was making significant concessions in return for vague assurances and were allowing the militants to regroup and rearm.

In the months following the agreement, militant promises remain unfulfilled and violent attacks continue. Additionally, the accord did not address militant attacks on American military targets. In June 2008, leaflets were distributed in the NWFP threatening attacks on transport companies that aid the flow of goods from the Karachi port to American forces in Afghanistan.

Corroborating fears that the extremism and violence of the NWFP would seep into the Pakistani capital, Taliban militants from the NWFP and the adjacent tribal areas are suspected of involvement in the June 2008 bombing of the Danish embassy in Islamabad, that killed six people.

At this writing, there is fear and anxiety that the provincial capital of Peshawar will soon fall to the Pakistani Taliban.

Major Terrorist Incidents – North West Frontier Province

January 7: A suicide car bombing near a military base in Swat injured 10 people, including eight soldiers.

January 17: A suicide bomber attacked a congregation hall for Shiite rituals in Peshawar killing 12 people and wounding 25 others.

February 9: A suicide attack at an election rally near Charsadda killed 27 people and injured over 30 others.

February 13: A roadside bomb blast hit an election campaign convoy in Swat, killing two people and injuring three others. Among the wounded was independent candidate Mufti Hussain Ahmed.

February 16: At least three people were killed and 18 others injured when a powerful bomb blast rocked the Media Centre in the Mingora area of Swat district.

February 22: A remote-controlled bomb exploded at a wedding party procession in the Matta division of Swat, killing 14 people and wounding 13 others, mostly children.

February 29: In Mingora, Swat, a suicide bomber blew himself up at a funeral killing 40 people, and wounding more than 75 others.

March 2: In Darra Adam Khel, a suicide bombing at a tribal council meeting killed 42 people and wounded 58 others.

March 17: In Mingora, Swat, a suicide bomber attacked the police barracks, killing two policemen and wounding five others.

April 11: Gunmen in Charsadda shot to death Khaliq Khan, head of the Intelligence Bureau in Charsadda.

April 25: A car bomb exploded near the Mardan City police station killing three people and injuring 26 others.

May 6: A suicide bomber blew himself up at a checkpoint in Bannu, killing a police officer and two civilians and injuring 12 people.

May 16: A bomb exploded in the Kohat Cantonment area killing two security officials.

May 18: A suicide bombing near an army base in Mardan killed 13 people, including five soldiers, and wounded 23 people. The Pakistani Taliban movement TTP claimed responsibility.

May 24: A roadside bomb blast in a police station in Peshawar killed two policemen.

June 4: A bomb blast at a video shop in Kohat killed three civilians and wounded three others.

June 6: Two bomb explosions in Dera Ismail Khan killed five people, including four policemen, and wounded 15 people, including nine policemen.

June 8: Islamic militants ambushed and killed four policemen in Matani, near Peshawar.

June 16: In Dera Ismail Khan, a bomb exploded outside a Shiite mosque killing four people, including a child, and wounding five people.

June 17: Islamic militants shot to death four Shiite Muslims near a market in Hangu.

June 22: In Kohat district, Islamic militants bombed a music shop, injuring three people.

June 26: In Matta tehsil, suspected militants shot to death local PPP leader Abdul Akbar Khan, his wife, and two sons.

June 29: A roadside bomb in the Swat district killed two security personnel. Attackers in different areas of Swat killed five people. In Hanu district, militants abducted nine officials of the water management department.

July 8: In Swat, militants shot to death a government religious leader.

July 13: In Dera Ismail Khan, a suicide bomber attacked a conference injuring four people.