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SALAFIST WAR ON SUFI ISLAM SPREADS TO PESHAWAR

The bombing of a famous Pesahawar shrine dedicated to a local Sufi saint is the latest episode of what appears to be an effort to define a new ethnic and religious identity in the northwest frontier region of Pakistan. The March 5 attack on the mausoleum of Rahman Baba, the most famous poet of the Pashto language and a major figure in the Pashtun cultural heritage, caused severe damage after explosives were lodged against the shrine's pillars (*The Nation* [Islamabad], March 10). The bombing occurred the same day as a rocket attack on the shrine of Bahadur Baba in the Nowshera District of the NWFP, 40 km north of Peshawar (*Daily Times* [Lahore], March 10). Militants had warned the custodians of both shrines against the Sufi tradition of praying to the dead saints, a practice viewed as heresy by the Salafists, whose Saudi-influenced concept of monotheism excludes any intercession with God by revered Islamic figures, including the Prophet Muhammad.

The attack on the Rahman Baba mausoleum is believed to be the work of the Lashkar-i-Islam, a Salafist militant group responsible for previous attacks on Sufi shrines, including the March 4, 2008, rocket attack on the 400-year-old Abu Saeed Baba shrine in the Khyber Agency that killed ten people. Rahman Baba was an 18th century poet whose work espoused the virtues of love and tolerance. His shrine has been a center for devotional Sufi music and singing by the Pashtun communities of Afghanistan and Pakistan since his death. Ten years ago, the Arab and Pashtun students of a new Saudi-funded Wahhabi madrassa down the road from the shrine began taking it upon themselves to prohibit traditional Sufi activities at the shrine as "un-Islamic." Frequent assaults on visitors to the shrine have caused a significant drop in visits.

The leader of the nearby Haqqania madrassa outlined his objections to Sufi attendance at the Rahman Baba shrine: “We don’t like tomb worship. We do not pray to dead men, even the saints. We believe there is no power but God. I invite people who come here to return to the true path of the Qur’an. Do not pray to a corpse: Rahman Baba is dead. Go to the mosque, not to a grave” (*Pakistan Observer*, March 8). The local Salafists appear to have been particularly enraged by the tradition of female Sufis singing at the shrine and attempted to impose a ban on all visits by women (*The Hindu*, March 9).

There have been other attacks on Muslim shrines in the Peshawar area in the last two years, including the December 2007 bombing of the shrine of Abdul Shakur Malang Baba and the attempted destruction of the shrine of Ashaab Baba just outside Peshawar in 2008 (*Daily Times*, March 10). Sufi shrines attended by both Sunnis and Shiites have in the past been special targets of those seeking to promote sectarian strife in Pakistan. A bombing at the shrine of Pir Rakhel Shah in March 2005 killed at least 50 people on pilgrimage; two months later a suicide bombing at the Bari Imam shrine outside Islamabad killed 25 and wounded over 200 (*Himalayan Times*, March 20, 2005; AFP, May 29, 2005). The Salafist campaign of tomb destruction has brought the Taliban and other Salafi Islamist groups into conflict with the descendants of Sufi saints who wield considerable political power in Pakistan (*The Nation*, March 10).

Large protests followed the most recent attacks, which had cross-border repercussions in Afghanistan and India. President Asif Ali Zardari has announced the federal government will assume responsibility for rebuilding the shrine of Rahman Baba, while the Kakakhel tribe has said it will undertake the reconstruction of the Bahadur Baba shrine (*The News* [Islamabad], March 7; March 10). The practice of destroying the tombs of Sufi saints has also been adopted by the radical Islamist al-Shabaab movement in Somalia, costing them considerable support in that traditionally Sufi nation.

SUDANESE JIHADIS DECLARE INTENTION TO CARRY OUT 250 SUICIDE BOMBINGS IN UNITED STATES, FRANCE AND UK

A coalition of militant Salafi-Jihadi groups in Sudan has threatened to carry out 250 “martyrdom operations” in the United States, France and the UK in response to the issue of a warrant by the International Criminal Court

for the arrest of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir on charges of war-crimes (*Akhir Lazha* [Khartoum], March 10). The strikes would target “world imperialists and CIA agents” in the three countries in what was described as “another September 11 attack” (*Sudan Tribune*, March 11). The statement was also carried by a number of jihadist websites. The coalition, calling itself the Coalition of Jihad and Martyrdom Movements, also called for the assassination of ICC prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo and Khalil Ibrahim, the Zaghawa leader of Darfur’s rebel Justice and Equality Movement (JEM).

Khalil Ibrahim’s movement staged a spectacular but unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the Bashir regime last May by sending a convoy of JEM fighters by truck all the way from the Chad border to the suburbs of Omdurman. The statement described Ibrahim and the Paris-based Abd-al-Wahid Muhammad Nur (the Fur leader of a faction of the rebel Sudan Liberation Army/Movement – SLA/M) as “Zionist agents,” an accusation commonly made by the Khartoum regime as a consequence of the leading role played by Jewish organizations in Darfur activism. The coalition announced the formation of joint brigades under a unified command to carry out jihad and rid Darfur of colonialist “filth.” The coalition also declared its intention to coordinate with other global jihadist movements.

The new threats follow a February 21 warning from Sudanese intelligence chief Salah Abdallah Gosh (who has worked closely with the CIA on counterterrorism issues despite being labeled as one of the architects of the Darfur crisis) of the consequences of an ICC warrant for al-Bashir: “We were once fanatical Islamists, but we have become moderates and now believe in coexistence and peace. However, we will never break apart and have no choice but to revert to our fanaticism in order to manage our battle with the ICC” (*Al-Sahafah* [Khartoum], February 21).

The statement was issued on March 9 by a group of mostly unknown Salafi-Jihadi militant groups, all apparently based in Sudan. Most notable of these was the Liwa’a Isud Darfur (Darfur Lions Brigade), which, according to the statement, is led by Shaykh Musa Hilal, the most prominent and powerful of the Janjaweed leaders in Darfur.

Musa Hilal’s involvement in the terrorist threat is interesting, as he remains an official of the Sudanese government, serving as Adviser to the Ministry of the

Federal Government since January 2008. The statement was carried in Sudan by *Akhir Lazha*, an Arabic-language daily thought to have close connections to Sudanese intelligence and the ruling National Congress Party led by Omar al-Bashir. In late February, Musa Hilal promised to mobilize 30,000 of Darfur's "finest mujahideen" to ensure anyone who supported the ICC would "pay the price" (*Al-Intibaha* [Khartoum], February 27). JEM has accused Musa Hilal's men of responsibility for the March 11 kidnapping of three Darfur-based members of relief organization Médecins Sans Frontières (AFP, March 13).

The other groups signing the statement are extremely obscure. They include; Jama'at al-Shahid Abu Qusaysah, Jama'at Ansar Allah al-Jihadiya al-Salafiya, Jama'at al-Bahisin al-Shihada and Jama'at Liwa'a al-Shahid Ali Abd al-Fatah.

Four soldiers belonging to United Nations/African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) were wounded by gunfire from an unknown source in Western Darfur the same day the statement was issued (AFP, March 10). Neither Sudan nor the United States has ratified the treaty establishing the powers of the ICC.

Militants Ask Whether Jihad is Defeated in Iraq

By Abdul Hameed Bakier

Prompted by a question posted in a jihadi internet forum, members discussed the current and future prospects of jihad and jihadi factions in Iraq. Special attention was given to the direction of the jihad movement after the scheduled withdrawal of part of the American occupation force (alboraq.info, March 9). Some forum members believe the jihadis have lost the war in Iraq and are moving on to Afghanistan. Others who claim involvement in jihad operations allege the mujahideen are intentionally decreasing insurgent operations in preparation for a takedown of Baghdad's "Green Zone" following the American pullback.

Forum member Abu Mansur al-Filastini began the discussion by asking; "Is jihad lost in Iraq?" The recent absence of serious jihadi operations, communiqués claiming terrorist attacks and the announcement of the U.S. partial withdrawal (which indicates a retraction of jihad) are the reasons given for raising the question at

this time. Al-Filastini suggests that, if jihad is in decline in Iraq, it is due to the jihadis' lassitude and not because of a U.S. triumph over jihadis in Iraq. In Afghanistan, the Taliban was defeated militarily but not ideologically, therefore the movement made a strong return. Al-Filastini believes the mujahideen in Iraq should admit failure and learn from their mistakes. Members who agreed with al-Filastini attribute the jihadist defeat to dissension among various jihadi groups, in particular the rivalry between the so-called Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the Jihad and Reform group, the Jihad and Change group and the Supreme

Command and Liberation Group.

Some forum participants asked why the mujahideen prevailed in Afghanistan over the Soviets but failed in Iraq. Forum member al-Fata al-Nabhani insisted the Western world not only supplied weapons and funds for the mujahideen to fight the Soviets, but also instructed their allies in the Gulf states to send mujahideen to avenge Moscow's backing of the Vietnamese against the United States. However, the seven main Afghan jihadi groups turned against each other after the Soviet withdrawal and it was not until they united under one flag that they regained control of Afghanistan. Similarly, al-Nabhani called upon Iraq's jihad groups to unite under one flag to be able to defeat the Americans: "The belief that the mujahideen's victory is looming in Iraq is a tattered, false assumption... Jihad has been gravely defeated."

More optimistic forum members responded by insisting the mujahideen have not lost and the decrease in attacks is only the calm that precedes the storm. The mujahideen are regrouping and their endeavors will bear fruit soon. "Out of experience in warfare and jihad, I assure you the battle has [only] just begun," says a member nicknamed Siyyaf, who added that the mujahideen Amirs and cadres are regrouping and preparing for the next phase of the struggle while awaiting the withdrawal of U.S. troops. These preparations include the procurement and caching of weapons, the recruitment of new mujahideen and the collection of intelligence. The next phase will commence with the surrounding and taking of the Green Zone in Baghdad, which houses government offices, foreign embassies and U.S. military facilities. Until this phase begins, the mujahideen are not idle, but are rather waging a war of attrition, as manifested in the current hit-and-run terror attacks.

Other optimists believe the United States lost the war in Iraq a year ago by failing to achieve their military objectives, thus draining available resources and breaking their morale. Many jihadist groups in Iraq are aware of the serious threat posed to them by the U.S.-armed and funded tribal Awakening Councils, which include many former jihadis. They urge the mujahideen to intensify their use of “stick-bombs” (an explosive device with a magnet that allows it to be “stuck” onto a target’s vehicle) against the chiefs of those Sunni tribes who are influential in the Awakening Councils. Jihadis claim such a technique was used to kill an Awakening Council leader in early March 2009 (al-faloja.info, March 8).

Other members who also claim to be involved in jihad assert that the mujahideen are concentrating on collecting intelligence pertinent to sensitive hard targets in order to salvage the public endorsement they lost through a focus on soft targets that resulted in massive civilian casualties. Members claim the ISI is adapting a new three-step strategy inspired by an audio lecture recorded by Shaykh Yusuf al-Ayyiri, a former Saudi al-Qaeda leader who was killed by Saudi security forces in 2003:

- 1) “Fake Defeat and Demise” – In this phase, jihadis would pretend they lost all capability of perpetrating further attacks to ease the urgency of the enemy’s pursuit of its members.
- 2) As a consequence of the success of the first step, the enemy would brag about its “victory” over the insurgents. Once the enemy concluded the jihad was over, it would be easy for jihadis to penetrate the enemy’s ranks and hit it from inside. To preserve the jihadi cadres, the mujahideen should not attempt to hold onto liberated areas.
- 3) Jihadis would refrain from publicizing insurgency operations in certain areas until all jihadis had the chance to evacuate these areas completely.

Despite all the explanations and assertions of jihadi preparations to regain control after the reduction in U.S. forces in Iraq, facts on the ground indicate the Iraqi jihadis are losing ground to the U.S.-trained legitimate Iraqi forces. A further indication of their difficulties is the flight of the muhajireen (non-Iraqi jihadis) who once poured into Iraq to fight the Americans.

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Evidence of French Intelligence Agency Rejected in Appeal of Former Guantanamo Inmates

By Pascale Combelles Siegel

They were already free. Now, they are innocent. On February 24, the Appeals Court in Paris overturned the conviction of five French Muslims, all former Guantanamo detainees repatriated in 2004 and 2005, on the charge of “criminal conspiracy in relation to a terrorist enterprise.” Brahim Yadel, Mourad Benchellali, Nizar Sassi, Khaled ben Moustapha, and Redouane Khalid were convicted in December 2007 of attending al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan in 2001. Their trial and the overturn of their conviction illustrates that the continued existence of Guantanamo is not simply an American problem, but one that could have far-reaching ramifications for how France prosecutes terrorism cases.

All five men acknowledged traveling to Afghanistan and enrolling in al-Qaeda-sponsored training camps. However, two of the men, Mourad Benchellali and Nizar Sassi, testified that they were tricked into joining the camp. They also added, along with Brahim Yadel, that they did not support Osama Bin Laden’s ideology. The circumstances that brought Redouane Khaled’s and Khaled Ben Moustapha to Afghanistan are not entirely clear. Local security forces detained four of them (Yadel, Benchellali, Sassi, and Moustapha) as they were trying to cross from Afghanistan into Pakistan to make their way back to France in the aftermath of 9/11. Nevertheless, joining a training camp may fall under the statute of “criminal conspiracy in relation with a terrorist enterprise.”

The fact that the five men were imprisoned at Guantanamo without charges weighed heavily on the outcome of the 2007 circuit court trial. The prosecutor argued at the time that “None of these men should have been detained there [Guantanamo], in complete disregard with international norms; and none of them should have been subjected to what they have been

subjected to” (AFP, December 11, 2007). Indeed, the prosecutor asked the tribunal to sentence the men because they were guilty of joining the camp, but asked for light sentences so that the men “would not return to prison” after time served in preventive detention. On December 12, 2007, the tribunal sided with the prosecution’s request for light sentences and condemned the five men to a year in prison. Three of the accused received an additional four years of suspended jail-time. According to the prosecutor, “I would not have requested the same imprisonment terms if they had not been in Guantanamo,” thus hinting that she would have requested longer sentences had the men not been sent to Guantanamo in the first place. It is actually unclear that this would have been the case. As a declassified note from the Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire (DST – France’s domestic intelligence agency) explained: “In case of repatriation to France, it may not be feasible to imprison and try them, because they did not commit any particular offense in France” (Rue 89, December 12, 2007).

In a lengthy sixty-page decision, the Appeals Court reversed the conviction, arguing that the conditions under which the DST was allowed to interrogate the five French citizens in Guantanamo violated the defenders’ legal rights. The DST went three times to Guantanamo to interview the French prisoners; in January 2002, March 2002, and January 2004. For the court, the “proofs” the prosecution presented had been tricked out of the defenders, who “were led to believe that their [incriminating] statements were necessary to obtain their repatriation in France and were not in a position to realize that they would be used against them” (*L’Express*, February 24). In consequence, the court ruled the statements obtained by the DST during their inquiry were inadmissible and concluded that, absent any other material evidence, there were no “elements to establish the culpability” of the accused (*L’Express*, February 24).

The decision highlighted the ambiguous role of the DST in counter-terrorism cases. The DST is a hybrid institution, acting both as an intelligence service designed to gather information in order to thwart a terrorist threat and as a police branch supporting the prosecution of terrorism cases. In each case, the DST operates under different sets of rules; according to the Appeals Court, the DST “cannot confuse the two procedures” without violating the rules of criminal procedure and the principles of international law (*Le Monde*, February 25).

After the prosecutor’s office opened its initial inquiry in February 2002, all subsequent DST interrogations of the suspects should have respected the rules of criminal procedure. According to the Appeals court, such was never the case, as the DST gathered evidence against the detainees under the cover of gathering intelligence (subject to a different set of procedures). According to the court, the DST debriefings cannot be considered “a case of intelligence collection in order to thwart a terrorist threat,” concluding the DST could not act as both an intelligence agency and a judicial police force (*Le Monde*, February 25; *Le Figaro*, February 24).

In addition, the Court found that the DST’s ambiguous role in the case was concealed from the justice system. In the initial trial, which began in the summer of 2006, the notes from the DST’s secret missions served as the basis for the accusation (Rue 89, December 12, 2007). However, because they were classified, the documents were never passed on to the defense. The discovery of the secret notes during the 2006 trial led to an adjournment, during which the judge, Jean-Claude Kross, requested an additional inquiry and asked for the declassification of the DST’s debriefings. [1] At that point, Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ representatives and DST officials conspicuously refused to provide details of their missions (*Le Monde*, February 20, 2007). It was only after an anonymous source tipped the tribunal as to the identity of the two DST agents who carried out the missions in Guantanamo that the DST agreed to release the memos.

The defense lawyers were elated by the Appeals Court judgment and saluted its historic decision. It is the first time that a terrorism procedure was thrown out because of the DST’s dual role. Said William Boudon, one of the attorneys; “This is an historical decision that defines the red line a democracy cannot cross” (*Le Monde*, February 25). The prosecutor’s office immediately appealed the ruling to the Supreme Court. A source in that office bitterly remarked; “this is tantamount to validating disloyalty” (*Le Monde*, February 25).

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Notes:

1. “Peine de principe: Mais quel principe,” chroniquedeguantanamo.blogspot.com, December 20, 2007. <http://chroniquedeguantanamo.blogspot.com/2007/12/peines-de-principe-mais-quel-principe.html>.

A Profile of Militant Groups in Bajaur Tribal Agency

By Mukhtar A. Khan

The bloody six month long stand-off in the restive and strategically important Bajaur Tribal Agency of Pakistan has ended in a ceasefire and an agreement between the Taliban and Pakistan's security forces. The 28-point undertaking includes a commitment by the local Taliban to lay down arms, surrender top Tehrik-i-Taliban commanders (including Maulvi Faqir Muhammad and Maulvi Omar), disband militant groups, halt attacks on Pakistan's security forces and stop cross border attacks into Afghanistan (*Daily Jang* [Rawalpindi], March 9). The military commander in Bajaur, Major General Tariq Khan, claims to have cleared the region of all militants with the conclusion of Operation Sher Dil (Lion Heart) (Associated Press of Pakistan, March 9). The operation started last August after a paramilitary convoy was besieged by the Taliban in Loi Sam, Bajaur. Despite the fact Bajaur has been a strategic asset the Taliban cannot afford to lose, the movement has so far been silent on the government's declaration of victory (Aaj TV [Islamabad], March 10).

Pakistan's military officials have admitted they faced stronger resistance in Bajaur than anywhere else in Pakistan's tribal regions since they started military operations against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in 2003. The bunkers and tunnel networks built by the Taliban gave a very tough time to the security forces. According to Pakistani officials, the majority of the militants in Bajaur were Afghans and Arabs (*Daily Mashriq* [Peshawar], March 9).

In the course of Operation Sher Dil, 84 members of the security forces were killed while more than 400 were injured. Local government officials claimed more than 1800 militants were killed in the fighting. 150 civilians are said to have been killed in these clashes with more than 2000 people injured and over 5000 houses destroyed. The military insists Bajaur will be cleared of all the militants by mid-March, though it had previously claimed the area would be cleared of militants by September 2008 (*Daily Khabrain* [Islamabad], March 9).

Strategic Importance of Bajaur Agency

Bajaur is an important hub for the Taliban and other militants. It is centrally located in regard to access routes to sensitive spots in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The volatile Swat district is located east of Bajaur while Mohmand tribal agency lies to the south. Bajaur has easy access to Afghanistan's Kunar and Nuristan provinces, both hotspots of Taliban activity. Kunar is the site of some of the deadliest attacks on U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan. Militants in this area have established safe havens in the lush green forests and rocky outcrops with the added support of the local Pashtun tribes. Trouble in this region can easily shake the government in Kabul. The Soviets were defeated in Kunar before making their retreat from Kabul. The adjoining province of Nuristan is similarly important from a strategic point of view, being linked to easy access routes through Kapisa province to Kabul (Aaj TV, January 10).

The Militant Leadership in Bajaur

Qari Zia Rahman, a young Afghan Jihadi commander in his early thirties, rose to prominence last October when Pakistan's military officials identified him as the leader of the stiff resistance they were facing in Bajaur. The Afghan commander made an alliance with Baitullah Mahsud, chief of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), to resist Pakistan's security forces in the Charmang, Tang Khatta and Loi Sam areas of Bajaur Province. Suffering heavy losses, Pakistan's security forces claimed Qari Zia's force consisted of trained fighters from Chechnya, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and various Arab nations who were receiving assistance from unnamed "foreign countries" (*Daily Times* [Lahore], October 24, 2008).

Son of local cleric Maulana Dilbar, Qari Zia has close ties with Osama bin Laden and considerable influence in Afghanistan's Nuristan and Kunar provinces. He was raised and trained in the camps of the Arab mujahideen, and has since developed a strong hatred for the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, carrying out several attacks on U.S. bases in Nuristan and Kunar. In Pakistan investigators believe that a suicide attack in Wali Bagh (NWFP) was the work of the Qari Zia group (*Nawa-i-Waqt* [Islamabad], October 4, 2008). In response to these activities, the U.S. government placed a \$350,000 bounty on his head. He was once captured in Pakistan but was released in an exchange of prisoners between the government and Taliban commander Baitullah Mahsud.

Qari Zia is not only in charge of the military affairs and finances of the Taliban in Kunar and Nuristan, but also represents this strategic region in the shura (council) of the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar (*Daily Mashriq*, November 6, 2008).

The Taliban leader in Bajaur, Maulvi Faqir Mohammad, is deputy to TTP leader Baitullah Mahsud and is believed to have close links with Bin Laden's deputy, Dr. Ayman Al-Zawahiri. He is alleged to have hosted a dinner for al-Zawahiri in January 2006 in Damadola, shortly before a US missile strike on the area which killed 18 people. Maulvi Faqir denied the allegation but has said that he will proudly host Ayman Zawahiri if he ever comes to Bajaur (*Daily Mashriq*, January 23). The 39-year-old Maulvi Faqir was born in the village of Sewai in Bajaur's Mamond tehsil (county), along the border with Afghanistan. He belongs to the Mohmand tribe but has his stronghold in Bajaur. Maulvi Faqir was raised in a religious family that fought against the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan and later alongside the Taliban.

Maulvi Faqir is an expert in guerrilla warfare and has been active in the region since the late 1980's, when he was a local leader of Jama'at-e-Islami, a Pakistani Islamist political party. He then joined Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) under the leadership of its founder, Maulana Sufi Mohammad. He accompanied Maulana Sufi's disastrous attempt to reinforce the Afghan Taliban with Pakistani mujahideen during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

Jihadi Groups in Bajaur

Unlike Swat, there exist several jihadi groups in Bajaur. Besides militant outfits like the TTP, the TNSM and the Qari Zia group, there are other jihadi groups, including the Jaish-e-Islam (JI) of Qari Wali Rahman (a.k.a. Raihan) and the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), a Punjabi cadre of militants headed by Qari Saifullah Akhtar. HuJI is suspected of involvement in last September's Marriott Hotel suicide blasts in Islamabad as well as a failed assassination attempt on Pakistan's former premier Benazir Bhutto on her return to Karachi in October 2007 (Geo TV [Islamabad], October 10, 2008). JI had some differences with the TTP but has now mended its ties with the group. Most of its members are Mamond tribesmen who come from the town of Damadola.

There are also reports that the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have a solid presence in the region. Another militant leader, Maulana Dr. Ismail, was formerly a leader of the mainstream religious political party, Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUI). Karwan-e-Niamatullah (Convoy of Niamatullah), headed by Haji Niamatullah of Salarzai, is a once powerful group with ties to the TTP. It had several thousand followers, but has now been rendered ineffective after the losses it suffered in combat with the local pro-government tribal lashkar (militia) in Bajaur (Geo TV, February 26).

Conclusion

The local people of Bajaur have shown great joy over the cease-fire, the lifting of curfews and the peace agreements between Taliban and the government. The 300,000 refugees that fled from Bajaur during the six-months of fighting may now return to their homes. But the important question is whether this agreement will prove lasting? Will the local Taliban stop cross-border attacks inside Afghanistan? Will they show the will or ability to refuse safe haven to al-Qaeda and other foreign militants? Will the government be able to back up its verbal assurances that the religious views of the tribal people and local Taliban will be respected in all spheres of life? The answer to all these questions is probably "no." Despite government claims that it has cleared Bajaur of all sorts of militants, the fact is that all the leading Taliban continue to roam there and many innocent civilians have been killed in the military operations in Bajaur.

There is great skepticism that this deal with the militants will not last for long, with fears that the militants will stage a comeback in the region. The deal will eventually reach its logical end of utter collapse and renewed fighting, as was witnessed in the past in the South and North Waziristan tribal agencies after the failure of similar deals with the government. Some observers suspect this deal is a smart military tactic on the part of Pakistani officials to give the Taliban an opportunity to assemble along the border of Afghanistan in preparation for attacks on U.S. and NATO troops. The idea is that once Pakistan's military stop fighting them, the Taliban will start attacking inside Afghanistan. Once out of the populous cities they would be crushed along the border between the two powerful armies with a minimum of collateral damage. However, given the elusiveness of the local Taliban, the chance of such a move being successful seems minimal.

Mukhtar A. Khan is a Pashtun journalist based in Washington, D.C., covering the issues of Taliban and al-Qaeda in Pakistan-Afghanistan border regions. Since 9/11, he has extensively covered the War on Terror in Pakistan-Afghanistan tribal areas, both for the local and international media, including the BBC, Mail on Sunday, and Voice of America.

Sectarianism in Pakistan's Kurram Tribal Agency

By Mariam Abou Zahab

A U.S. drone missile attack on a Taliban training camp on March 12 highlighted the growing importance of Pakistan's Kurram Tribal Agency in the war along the frontier with Afghanistan. Unlike Pakistan's other six tribal agencies, the conflict in Kurram is complicated by sectarian divisions that have flared into violent encounters between the region's Sunni and Shi'a Muslim communities.

Communities in Conflict

Sectarian violence is not a new phenomenon in Kurram, which is the only tribal agency with a significant Shi'a population. Around 40 percent of the region's 500,000 inhabitants are Shi'a. Upper Kurram is inhabited largely by the Turi (the only Pashtun tribe which is wholly Shi'a) while Lower Kurram is inhabited by Sunnis.

Historically the Turis were under Bangash domination until the 18th century when they attacked the Bangash, turned them into hamsaya (dependants) and pushed them into Lower Kurram. The Bangash clans living in Lower Kurram are all Sunnis, while other Bangash clans are Shi'a, Sunni, or a mix of both. The Afghans renounced their claim over Kurram as a result of the Treaty of Gandamak in 1879 and the Turis requested the British take over the administration of the area. This occurred with the establishment of the Kurram Agency in 1892. The agency headquarters at Parachinar is less than 100 km from Kabul.

There are disputes over land and water resources between Sunni and Shi'a tribes and sporadic incidents of communal violence have taken place since the 1930s, particularly during Muharram or Nowruz (the Iranian New year as celebrated by the Shi'a). The massive influx of Afghan refugees in the 1980s caused a distortion in

the demographic balance of the area. Afghan refugees introduced a militant brand of Sunni ideology at a time when the Shi'a of Parachinar under the leadership of cleric Allama Arif Hussain al-Hussaini (trained in the Shi'a theological centers of Najaf and Qom) were being radicalized by the Iranian revolution. As modern weapons became available, clashes grew in frequency and intensity, while the local administration was viewed as indifferent or seen as taking sides (*Dawn* [Karachi], November 19, 2007). The first large-scale attack took place in 1986 when the Turis prevented Sunni mujahideen from passing through to Afghanistan. General Zia ul-Haq allowed a "purge" of the Turi Shi'a at the hands of the Afghan mujahideen in conjunction with the local Sunni population (*Daily Times* [Lahore], November 11, 2007). Allama Hussaini was killed in 1988 and the Turis held General Zia responsible. There were major clashes again in 1996, in which over 200 Sunnis and Shi'a were killed after a college principal was murdered by Shi'a activists (*Gulf Times*, September 7, 2005).

Impact of the Collapse of the Taliban State

The Shi'a did not offer shelter to al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban fleeing Tora Bora in 2001. One tribe agreed to shelter the Arabs but another betrayed them to the authorities, who took them to the jail in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) city of Kohat. A gunfight on the way to Kohat left ten Arabs dead.

The nature and the dimension of the sectarian conflict have changed since 2001. Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) have become a sanctuary for Punjabi members of Sunni extremist groups banned in 2002 who took shelter in the tribal areas, particularly in Lower Kurram and Orakzai Agency. These groups included the Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), the Lashkar-e Jhangvi (LJ) and the Jaish-e Mohammad (JeM). After the earthquake of October 2005, militants belonging to Lashkar-e Taiba and other groups active in Kashmir relocated in FATA and the Kohat area.

Kurram is now in the grip sectarian of violence—in the last two years, more than 1,500 persons have been killed and 5,000 others injured (*The News* [Islamabad], September 19, 2008). The violence started in April 2007 after a procession in Parachinar was fired on (*Dawn*, April 9, 2007). In the clashes that followed, mortars and RPGs were used, resulting in heavy casualties that left 215 people dead and over 600 injured (*The News*, April 6, 2008). The Sunnis accused Iran of providing

weapons to Shi'a fighters. Mast Gul of the Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) alleged in an April 9 press conference in Peshawar that Iran was providing money and weapons to the Shi'a and that if the Pakistan army did not take action, Sunnis would come from other parts of the country to help the local Sunnis.

The storming of Islamabad's Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in July 2007 was a turning point. The militants entrenched in the mosque were made to believe that the soldiers who led the assault were all Shi'a. From the summer of 2007, sectarian killings in FATA and the beheading of captured Shi'a members of the Army and the Frontier Corps were revenge for the assault on Lal Masjid.

JeM reorganized under Mufti Abdul Rauf, who established a training camp in Kohat, long a hotbed of sectarian violence and a stronghold of the SSP. Javed Ibrahim Paracha, a former Member of the National Assembly, has declared openly that he is at war with the Shi'a. After JeM and SSP militants regrouped in Kohat and in Lower Kurram (traditionally a SSP stronghold), there was an upsurge in sectarian attacks both in FATA and in the settled areas, notably Dera Ismail Khan and Hangu.

The Latest Round of Violence

A new spell of sectarian violence started in November 2007. Sunnis accused the Shi'a of hurling a hand grenade at the central mosque in Parachinar during Friday prayers, while the Shi'a accused Sunnis of firing rockets at homes and mosques. The army used helicopter gunships to control Parachinar and Sadda (headquarters of Lower Kurram), but the fighting continued in the rural areas. Local Sunnis were joined by al-Qaeda fighters and Taliban from Waziristan who targeted the paramilitary forces (*Frontier Post*, December 27, 2007). According to the UNHCR, 6,000 Sunnis, mostly women and children, fled to Afghanistan in January 2008 (*Daily Times*, January 2, 2008). In the following month a suicide attack in front of the election office of the Pakistan Peoples Party candidate (a Shi'a) killed 47 people and wounded roughly 100 (*Daily Times*, February 18, 2008). The clashes intensified during the summer and the government was blamed for doing nothing to stop the influx of militant outsiders from North Waziristan. In June 2008, people from Kurram staged a demonstration in front of Parliament House in Islamabad seeking the intervention of the federal government, but to no avail. Instead of intervening to stop the violence, the government kept claiming that

there was no sectarian problem in Kurram, blaming a foreign hand for pitting the tribes against each other (*Dawn*, September 26, 2008).

As the violence continued, the road from Parachinar to Peshawar was blocked, resulting in a shortage of food and medicines. Shi'a truck drivers were abducted and beheaded. Shi'a communities were besieged as Sunnis controlled the road from Parachinar to Thal. People going to Peshawar were forced to travel via Paktia and Kabul. Those who took the risk of traveling through Kohat and Dara Adam Khel –where the Taliban have been active since early 2007 - were often abducted: "They stop every vehicle, ask the passengers to remove their shirts [to identify Shi'a by the marks left on their back by Muharram flagellations] and also check their ID cards" (*Dawn*, September 6, 2008). Paramilitary troops were frequently abducted - while Sunnis were generally released, Shi'a soldiers were often beheaded.

A unilateral ceasefire was declared by the Turis ahead of Ramadan, but the bloodshed continued (*Dawn*, September 2, 2008). A peace jirga was later convened in Islamabad under the supervision of the Political Agent of Kurram. An agreement was reached, the road reopened, power restored and dozens of people who had been abducted by rival clans released (*The News*, December 7, 2008; December 17, 2008). A general perception that the Shi'a had emerged as the winners in the struggle led to retaliatory violence in other parts of Pakistan. A December 5 bomb blast in the Kucha Risaldar district of Peshawar that killed as many as 34 people and wounded over 120 others targeted a local Shi'a community that mostly hailed from Parachinar. There were also clashes in Hangu (NWFP) during Muharram.

Sectarianism Spreads to the Orakzai Agency

The sectarian clashes spilled over to the Orakzai Agency where 10 to 15% of the Orakzai tribe is Shi'a. The agency does not share a border with Afghanistan and was at relative peace until October 2008 (*Herald Monthly* [Pakistan], October 2008). The conflict in Orakzai is mainly over the ownership of Mir Anwar Shah Shrine at Kalaya. This shrine, which originally belonged to the Shi'a, was given to the Sunnis during British rule. Later the Shi'a were allowed to visit and ensure its maintenance. In 2000 the Taliban declared this agreement un-Islamic and warned the Shi'a not to return. The militants occupied a hilltop and fired RPGs and mortars on neighboring villages (Afghan News Center, January 18, 2001). The Taliban also expelled

the Shi'a from fertile land and forced them to pay jiziya (poll tax on non-Muslims). In October 2006, the shrine was reduced to rubble after a seven day battle over its ownership. People from both sects were banned from entering the disputed area. The trouble in Kalaya continued, with a suicide car-bomb killing six people at a jirga called by the Shi'a to settle a dispute with the Sunnis in December, 2008.

The Taliban based in Lower Orakzai have also been stirring sectarian violence in Kohat and Hangu. (Reuters, December 5, 2008). Moreover, access for Kurram is through Orakzai and by blocking the road, the Taliban are effectively putting the Kurram Shi'a under siege.

Conclusion

Both sects accuse each other of drawing support from outside; the Sunnis are alleged to be backed by the Taliban and the Shi'a by Iran and the Afghan Hazaras. Traditional leaders from both sects have lost control over the situation as very young fighters fill the ranks on both sides of the conflict (*The News*, September 2, 2008). Jirgas are no longer effective in resolving issues, particularly in the rural areas of Kurram. Even as American drones target sites within the Kurram tribal agency, the continuing struggle between Sunnis and Shi'a shows few signs of abating.

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